



M. E. Wood

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THE
HOUSE OF HALLIWELL

A Novel

BY
MRS. HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF
“EAST LYNNE,” “THE CHANNINGS,” “JOHNNY LUDLOW,”
ETC., ETC.

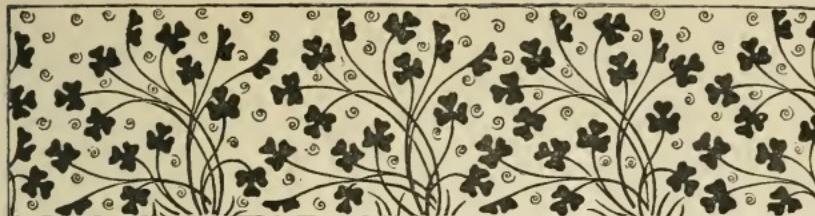
IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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P R E F A C E.

“THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL” was written by Mrs. Henry Wood many years ago—as far back as the days when she had not as yet written “*East Lynne*.” It was at that time prepared for publication in three volumes, but was never offered to any publishing firm.

The story a little differs in style and construction from the author’s later works, but possibly for that reason may bear its own special interest in indicating how the dramatic and constructive power of a writer is developed by experience. For, as an Essayist recently remarked, talent exhausts itself, but genius goes on from strength to strength.

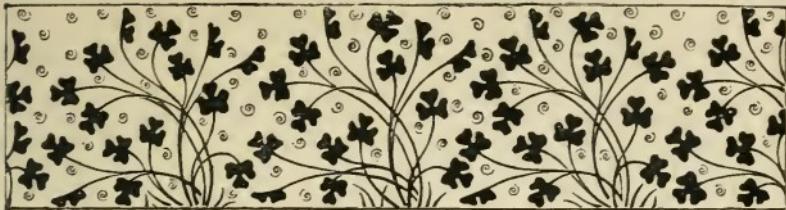
Therefore, if Mrs. Henry Wood were still here, it is possible that the present story would be altered and elaborated; but the interest arising

from tracing the contrast existing between this and succeeding works would have been destroyed.

Nevertheless, in spite of its early date, every page of “The House of Halliwell” from the opening to the closing scenes, bears the impression of the hand of the Author of “East Lynne,” whose place in the world of Fiction is marked by a style and individuality that cannot be mistaken and cannot be imitated. In the present story, also, the reader is introduced to Aunt Copp and her son Sam—characters which Mrs. Henry Wood later on described in her novel of “The Red Court Farm”—not repeating the incidents, but carrying on the lives. Those who have read that story will, we hope, welcome Aunt Copp in the earlier days of her career; and others, who have not read it, receive the energetic and humorous lady, and her downright and outspoken son, as fresh and entertaining personages.

It only remains to add that “The House of Halliwell” and “The Red Court Farm” are quite separate and independent stories, the one of the other.

C. W. W.



THE
HOUSE OF HALLIWELL.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAJOR : AND AUNT COPP.

A FAMILY party was gathered round the drawing-room fire in the house of Major Halliwell : a handsome residence, situated in the village of Seaford, some twenty miles' distance from London. It was a fine, warm evening in the beginning of September, and there was little need of a fire ; but the Major had passed some of his days in India, and

always took to evening fires before anyone else thought of them.

The Major was the chief representative of the name and House of Halliwell. A noble and renowned and loyal house it had been in its palmy days ; but the earldom had become extinct in the early time of George the Third, and its descendants had since been dwindling down in the scale of grandeur. The Major's eldest girl was named after one who had been a heroine in her generation—the Lady Hester Halliwell, sister of the last Earl Halliwell. The Lady Hester had refused to marry, but had won fame and love for her good and noble and charitable deeds. Her portrait was reverently preserved in the Major's drawing-room, and its face certainly bore a remarkable resemblance to that of her namesake, the present Hester.

Major Halliwell was a good-natured, merry man, who had made money in India, had sold

out of the King's service, and come home to enjoy it. Then the Major married. He is a man, you see, of about six-and-sixty now, whilst his children are young. Mrs. Halliwell—she sits on the opposite side of the fire to the Major, and wears a gray satin gown—is a stately, handsome woman, with a thoughtful countenance. Five children remain out of a large family. Alfred, a fine young man of twenty ; Hester, just eighteen, who does not seem inclined to be tall, but she has the Lady Hester's grave, kindly face and reflective eye ; Jane, who is not here to-night ; Lucy, a merry girl of fifteen ; and little Mary, the youngest born.

When dusk came on, Mrs. Halliwell rang for lights. The servant who entered with them was turning to close the inside shutters and draw the crimson curtains, but Mary stood there.

“Stop a bit, John,” said the child ; “I want to see what that is at the gate.”

The man was taller than the child, and could see over the hedge at the foot of the garden. "It is the stage-coach, miss," he said.

"The stage-coach!" echoed Alfred. "At our gate?"

Hester and Lucy followed him to the window. A lady, so far as they could see through the gate and the dusk, had stepped from the coach, and an enormous box was being taken down from the roof.

"Oh!" cried Mary, in delight; "suppose it is Jane come back for something! I hope it is."

"You little stupid!" retorted Alfred. "As if Jane would come back again!"

"That looks like a sea-chest," persisted Mary, "and Jane's——"

"I think it is Aunt Copp," interrupted Hester.

"Aunt Copp!" echoed the Major, spring-

ing to the window, whilst Alfred flew out to the gate.

He returned triumphantly, Aunt Copp on his arm ; the guard, and John, and a man who was passing and volunteered help, followed, lugging at the sea-chest. "Aunt Copp," as she was universally called in the family, was the Major's only sister, but quite young enough to be his daughter. She was short and stout ; a pale, round, complacent face, and black eyes. Their father, Colonel Halliwell, had likewise spent a large portion of his life in India ; his son was born before he went there, his daughter after his return ; and that was not for many, many years. Aunt Copp was a wonderful woman, positive and contradictory in manner, kind, like the Major, at heart, and so good-natured that people used to say she would give away her head if it were loose. She had been self-willed, not disobedient, in the matter of

her marriage, and had wedded a sailor, a captain in the merchant service. She might have done so much better, everyone told her. Of course she might, was her answer, had she chosen to do so, but she did not choose. She was wont to accompany Captain Copp on his voyages, and they had thought her absent on one now. They all gathered round her and took her things off, overwhelming her with questions, whilst Mrs. Halliwell ordered in the tea.

“Where and when did you land?” inquired her brother.

“Got into Liverpool three days ago. An eight months’ run we have had of it home; contrary winds all the way.”

“Where from last?”

“China,” returned Aunt Copp. “Brought in a cargo of tea. Right glad to my heart was I to touch land, for young Sam was getting worse than a monkey on board,

climbing up the rigging, and holding on by one foot, and the more I called to him the more he'd stop. He has learned to swear: you should hear him."

"I advised you not to take him," said the Major.

"I wish we had not taken him. But the Captain would, and I would; and there's an end of it. As soon as we landed, I inquired for a good, sharp boarding-school, and they told me of two. I took my young gentleman to an outfitter's, rigged him out, clapped him into a postchaise, and drove him off to the nearest."

"Without inquiries or references?" demanded Mrs. Halliwell.

"What's the good of them?" asked Aunt Copp. "I saw it was a respectable place, with forty boys in it. They live well, and that's the chief thing: plenty of good roast meat and pudding, for I saw the lads at

dinner. Forty pounds a year, and forty-four if he stays the holidays. The master asked me what he was to be, and young Sam spoke up for himself, as perky as possible. ‘A sailor,’ said he; ‘and it’s no use mamma saying I shan’t.’”

“ You cannot expect him to choose anything else, Rebecca,” cried the Major, “ after letting him taste salt water for eighteen months.”

“ As good take to salt water as stop where there’s nothing but fresh,” replied Mrs. Copp; “ only I don’t say so before young Sam. We don’t have half the bother at sea that you do on land.”

“ Where have you left the Captain?”

“ With the ship. She wants a deal of overhauling, and of course old Sam must be in the thick of it, or it wouldn’t be him. Six or eight weeks the men will be about it, and the Captain busier than they all the time.

Children, I have brought you all a present from China ; seven presents have I got in my chest. If it had not been for those presents, I don't know that I should have dragged the chest here ; a regular fight I had with the guard about bringing it."

"There are not seven of them now, Rebecca," said Major Halliwell, dropping his voice.

"No ! Where are they then ?"

"Two are taken, and one we lost to-day—in a different manner."

"Bless my heart !" ejaculated Mrs. Copp, the latter part of the sentence rendering her oblivious of the former. "Lost one to-day ! How ?"

"Jane was married this morning."

Aunt Copp's mouth opened with astonishment, and she looked from one to the other. "Married ! Jane Halliwell ! Your daughter Jane ?"

"And there's such a great wedding-cake," cried Mary.

"Then, Major, I can only think you and Mrs. Halliwell are both bereft of your senses. A young thing like Jane! Why, she was in short frocks when I left."

"That is two years ago, Aunt Copp," interposed Hester.

"Jane is young, too young," sighed Mrs. Halliwell. "She was seventeen last week. But the gentleman to whom she was engaged was going out to India, and wished to take her. Had we refused, they might have worn out their lives waiting for each other."

"I should have refused," said Aunt Copp positively; "and boxed Jane's ears for thinking of such a thing. I only wish I had been at home. Who has she married?"

"Lieutenant Pepper. A very delightful young man."

"Possesses nothing, of course," growled Aunt Copp, "but his pay and his regiments."

"Indeed, he does," laughed the Major; "he made a very fair settlement on Jane."

"I don't care," persisted Aunt Copp. "If he had settled all Calcutta and the Ganges on her, she ought not to have married. Throwing a child like that on Indian society with no one to look after her!"

"I do not fear for Jane," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We did propose that they should wait for a year or two, and Mr. Pepper proceed without her; but he was much against it, and——"

"To be sure," interrupted Aunt Copp. "Children are against taking physic, but it's good for them."

"I am glad we did not separate them," said Mrs. Halliwell musingly. "Those delayed marriages are so frequently frus-

trated for good. Had it turned out so in this case, Jane might have blamed us all her life."

"Well, it's done, and it can't be undone," concluded Aunt Copp. "How can I send Jane's present after her?"

"Don't attempt it," advised the Major. "They sail at the end of the week, and Jane has a van-load of fine things as it is. Give it to Hester instead."

"I must say one thing," resumed Mrs. Copp, "that, for a wedding-day, you are desperately quiet. I never heard of such a thing as remaining quietly at home, with not a soul but yourselves. When I was married, girls, we had a ball in the evening, and I and my husband, your Uncle Sam, stopped and opened it."

"We said we had lost two children besides Jane," said Mrs. Halliwell, in a half-whisper. "We have only thrown off our mourning for

to-day, and shall resume it to-morrow. How could we have any rejoicing?"

"Tell me about it," said Mrs. Copp.

"It was darling little James and Frederick," answered Lucy, with tears in her eyes. "They died last May."

"Both died?"

"Both. Only two days apart from each other."

"My patience! Poor little dears. What was it?"

"Scarlet fever," cried the Major; "it was raging in the neighbourhood, and the three young ones took it. Mary recovered, but the poor boys died."

"Ah!" groaned Aunt Copp, "that was bad management. I wish I had been at home. What doctors did you have?"

"Mr. Davis, the medical man here. They were only ill, one four, the other five days."

"I tell you, then, it was bad management took those boys, and nothing else."

"I think it was not quite that," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"What else, pray?" snapped Aunt Copp.

"God's will."

Aunt Copp was silent for a bit: then she resumed :

"There's one plan to be pursued with scarlet fever, and that is, before it comes on, the very instant you have a suspicion that the child is sickening for it, give him a regular good dosing. Never mind his kicking and crying, and saying he won't take medicine; give it him: the more he fights, the more you give. In a few hours he will be much more subdued; and the fever, when it comes, will take less hold upon the system; it won't mount to the throat. Give the child plenty to drink, and keep him cool, and he will have it lightly."

"But, Aunt Copp," broke in Alfred, much amused, "suppose it is not the fever that he is sickening for? You would waste your medicine."

"Never mind, lad. I am quite certain that three parts of the fatal cases of scarlet fever are caused by the neglect of this preparatory measure. I saved my boy's life, Major, when he sickened for it; and I would have saved yours."

"I think a great deal does lie in the treatment," observed Major Halliwell.

"Everything lies in it," responded Aunt Copp. "However, talking over these gloomy things will not make you all brighter. The poor little darlings are in Heaven, better off than they would ever have been here."

"Aunt Copp," whispered Hester, later in the evening, "will you not tell our fortunes? You know you never would."

"Because, child, I have told some that have come true, and then folk have turned round and blamed me for frightening them."

"I shall not. I wish you would tell mine. Do. We ought to have some fun this evening."

"If I tell you bad luck, you will not call it fun."

"Oh, yes, I shall."

"You will promise to stand it, without being afraid?"

"That I will," laughed Hester.

"Well, get the cards then. I suppose it is allowable, Major?"

"Allowable! such trash as that! You may tell them all night if you like."

"If you can really find amusement in anything so nonsensical," added Mrs. Halliwell, with an imperceptible curl of the lip.

"Do not ridicule too soon," replied Aunt Copp. "Shuffle and cut the cards, Hester."

"Shuffle well, Hester," said her brother, as he leaned over Aunt Copp's chair and laughed. "Let us hear what sort of a husband you are to have."

"Hallo, Master Alfred," broke in the Major, with a comical expression of countenance; "a staunch Churchman, as you are to be, has no business to watch the dealings of the black art. When you come to be ordained, how will you face your bishop, sir?"

"Major," interrupted Mrs. Copp, "you will oblige me by not talking."

"Silence all," cried the Major. "Children, we are in the hands of an unknown power."

"Well," exclaimed one of them impatiently, as Aunt Copp's process appeared to grow rather tedious, "what is Hester's fortune?"

"Hester, child, it is nothing good," said Aunt Copp. "Shall I tell it you?"

“Oh, please do,” laughed Hester.

“Well then, child, to begin with, you will not have a husband at all. You’ll be pretty near it, but somehow it will slip away, and you’ll never marry.”

“What a dreadful thing!” uttered Lucy, with a long face. “I will not have mine told.”

“I don’t know that Hester will care much about it, though,” resumed Aunt Copp, her eyes following the cards. “For it seems as if you would be in the midst of business, child, all your life; the business of others: some good, some bad. I should say you would be full of usefulness, my dear, so console yourself.”

“Ay, do console yourself, Hester,” mocked the Major. “I hope you will be able to sleep to-night.”

Mrs. Copp was nettled. “You may make as much game as you like, James, but I know

the cards tell true, and that Hester will be an old maid. You'll see."

"I shan't live to see," responded the Major ; "it will be beyond my time. Hester, how many cats shall you keep?"

"Shall I tell yours ?" exclaimed Mrs. Copp, with animation. "Come, Major ; and then you will prove whether I tell true or not."

"Have at you!" answered the Major. "Hand over the cards. Shuffle first, isn't it?"

Hester stole round the table and laid her hand on the pack. "Papa," she said, "do not have it done."

The Major turned and put on his spectacles to stare at her.

"Why, Hester ! you are never such a goose!"

"I do not believe in what Aunt Copp has told me, or care for it," was the remark of Hester. "But if she said anything bad to you, papa, I might think of it."

"Be quiet, Hester," said Aunt Copp. "I'll tell him, and then he'll remember not to mock at me in future."

The Major nodded at his children, and they looked on with a smile. All, except Hester : she stood, grave and quiet, one arm folded over the other.

"If I did not know to the contrary," began Aunt Copp, studying the Major's "fortune" in the cards, as they were arrayed out before her, "I should say you were immersed in business, James. Here you are, you see, up to your eyes in worry."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the Major. "Go on."

"I had rather not go on," replied Aunt Copp, after another pause. "It is the worst fortune I ever told in my life. Here's perplexity, disappointment, loss of money, not only to you, but to all who surround you ; and there's something worse than that."

"Tell it out," cried the Major.

"Death," said Aunt Copp, "and very speedy. It follows you; it will follow you, place the cards as I will."

The Major laughed till his eyes watered. "Alfred, boy, run for a lawyer. I'll make my will."

Aunt Copp pushed the cards together, and threw them on a side-table. "I am sorry I told it," she said.

"Look at Hester!" exclaimed Alfred, who was making merry, like his father. She was standing in the same position, every vestige of colour having forsaken her face. Mrs. Halliwell indignantly reproached her.

Hester aroused herself. "Mamma, I do not put faith in it; I don't know what made me look as I did. It is only nonsense."

"Of course it is," haughtily responded Mrs. Halliwell. "Take the keys, Hester, and reach out the wine and the wedding-

cake. Your aunt has not yet wished prosperity and happiness to Jane."

Hester took the keys, and departed on her errand. But her face was white still.

"Aunt Copp, where did you learn to tell fortunes?" demanded Lucy.

"On my first voyage to India, Lucy: that is, coming home. We had an Indian woman on board, an ayah, as they are called, who was nursing a sick lady, and I learnt it of her."

"Is it the way they do it in England?"

"Do what?" returned Mrs. Copp sharply.

"That they tell fortunes on the cards in England," explained Lucy.

"Certainly not," indignantly replied Mrs. Copp. "As if I would trouble my head with such child's play as that."

Lucy coloured and hesitated. "Aunt Copp, does your way *always* tell true?"

Aunt Copp, in her turn, hesitated: it was

a home question, after what she had just promised the Major. "I do not know that it always tells true, Lucy; it does sometimes. It is very rarely that I can be persuaded into telling a fortune. I was foolish to have been so to-night. What a brave wedding-cake!"

"It was when it was whole," said Mrs. Halliwell. "Jane took some of it with her for the voyage."

"For the voyage!" echoed Aunt Copp. "Ah! Jane is like a young bear, just now—all her sorrows to come: as she will find, when she is in the midst of sea-sickness. I know I wished the ship would go to the bottom and I, poor soul, with it, when I went my first voyage. Wedding-cake at sea!"

"I could eat wedding-cake even if I were sea-sick," cried Lucy, hoping her mamma was going to cut her a large piece then and there.

"Could you, my dear?" significantly re-

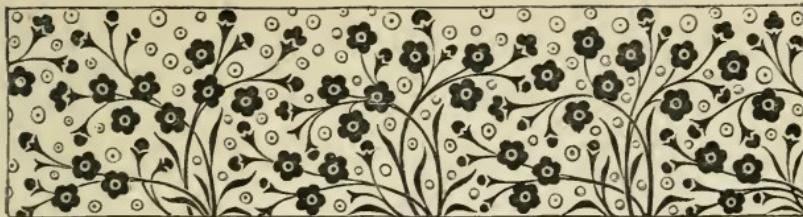
turned Aunt Copp. "Major, how came you to let them sail at this season? They will come in for all the equinoctial gales."

"Pepper could not choose his time. He had to go when he was ordered."

"Poor Jane! a fine sick bear's life she will have of it. I'd rather stand a hurricane than the winds of the equinox."

And, what with talking, drinking healths, and the wedding-cake, the evening came to a close, and the young people retired.





CHAPTER II.

THE MAJOR'S INVESTMENT.

"Now for a bit of cosy chat all to ourselves, according to old custom," cried Aunt Copp, drawing her chair to the fire between Major and Mrs. Halliwell, and putting her feet on the fender. "What a good-looking young fellow Alfred grows!"

"He'll do," said Major Halliwell.

"Do! I should think his looks would do. Why in the world do you make a parson of him?"

"He did not like the army. And one could not put a Halliwell to trade."

“ But a parson !” remonstrated Aunt Copp. “ Poor creatures, if they do get into any little scrape or peccadillo, it must put such a weight of responsibility on their heads. And men are not saints all their lives long, parsons or no parsons.”

“ Oh, he will get along, just as other parsons do,” laughed the Major.

“ He is an excellently-disposed lad,” added Mrs. Halliwell. “ He has not a vice about him.”

“ Mothers always think that,” responded Aunt Copp, in her provoking way. “ I hope he’ll get a good living : not one of your paltry starvation things, at a hundred a-year.”

“ I expect to leave him something worth having, Rebecca,” said the Major. “ More than I once thought for.”

“ How’s that ?” cried Aunt Copp, pricking up her ears. “ They’ll have—now there are

only five of them—from three to four thousand each, I suppose."

"Double that, I hope," said the Major. "Your fortune-telling cards were not far out to-night, when they said I was up to my ears in business. I am not, but my money is."

"What on earth do you mean?" questioned Aunt Copp.

"I withdrew my money from the Funds about fourteen months ago, to invest it. It brings me in larger interest, and the capital—whenever I like to withdraw it—will also be doubled in the shape of a bonus."

"Invest it in what?" was the sharp question.

"In a Company. The Perpetual Aid Fire and Life Insurance Company."

Aunt Copp gazed at the Major. "What possessed you to do that? And you," she added, turning short round to Mrs. Halliwell, "how could you let him do it?"

"Did anyone ever do a thing yet that you did not find fault with, Rebecca?" testily demanded the Major.

"Because I have my weather-eye open, and can see into things clearer than some folk," responded Aunt Copp. "Mrs. Halliwell, I say," laying her hand on that lady's, "how came you to let James risk his children's money?"

"If we must tell you the truth, Rebecca, I did not know of it until it was done," was the reply.

"If there's a nuisance in the world, it is for women to interfere in business matters," chimed in the Major. "It's what they don't understand, and they get worried and fidgety. I knew my wife would be afraid and say, 'Don't risk it;' so I just did it, and told her when it was done."

Aunt Copp paused. "James," she resumed in a very grave tone, "if I were to tell you

you have committed a sin in doing this you would not believe me."

The Major whistled. "Just as much as I believed you when you told me I was going to die."

"What did you do it for?"

"To make more money, of course."

"You had plenty. Plenty for comfort, and a nice little fortune for each child after you."

"There is no law against making money, is there?"

"There is no law that will bring you up to be tried for it by judge and jury; but I know this, I'd rather be bound to the figure-head of our ship and be sent adrift in her without a helmsman, than I would wickedly risk the little money that belonged to my child. Do you suppose these reckless schemes don't bring their own punishment with them? Of course they do."

"That's right," cried the Major. "Go on, Becky."

"Suppose the thing fails, this precious fire company, where——"

"It's not going to fail," interrupted the Major; "it's paying heavy dividends."

"*Suppose* it fails," persisted Aunt Copp, "and the money disappears down Davy Jones's locker, you will have committed a crime against your own children. You will, James Halliwell."

"Rubbish," answered the Major.

"And the children will pass their lives expiating your sin. I tell you, James, it is a sin; some may call it imprudence, but it is nothing less than sin: and they must struggle and fight their way through life, and so expiate it."

"It is time to go to bed," said the Major.

"Bed can wait. The very fact of your

having to conceal the transaction from your wife ought to have proved to you that it was a piece of wrong-doing. When a man takes to deceiving his wife, good-bye to prosperity. Mrs. Halliwell, tell me—had James consulted you about using the money, would you have consented?"

"No," was the reply. "I should have dreaded the risk."

"Nor any other woman in her senses. You talk about women not understanding business, Major; they are a great deal clearer-sighted than men. Now do you know what you must do, James?"

"Well?"

"Go up to London without a day's delay, and take your money out of the fire. If you can't get the doubled capital, held out as a bait, take the single, and put it into the Funds again."

"Impossible," laughed the Major. "There

must be three months' notice of withdrawal first."

"How much notice?" returned Aunt Copp, in a very sharp tone.

"Three months."

"Then give the notice to-morrow, and take it out at the three months' end. Will you do this?"

"Not if I know it, Becky. It pays me too good interest."

"Then just see if you don't repent it. And the Lord help your poor wronged children!"

The Major rose, stretched himself, and spoke good-humouredly: "You are brighter at sea than you are on land, Becky, think of it as you will. Good-night; pleasant dreams to you."

"Pleasant dreams to you, if your conscience will allow of them," retorted Aunt Copp. "Make him do it," she whispered to Mrs. Halliwell.

This was on the Tuesday. On the following Monday, as they were seated at breakfast, the Major said he was going to London.

"To do what I recommended?" asked Aunt Copp eagerly.

"Not I," said the Major, while Mrs. Halliwell gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head as her sister-in-law glanced at her. "I am going for a few hours' pleasure. Will you go with me, Becky?"

"Not to-day," replied Mrs. Copp. "How do you go?"

"Harkaway coach. It leaves here at eleven, and gets back at nine. Alfred, when you have finished breakfast, you can run to the Wheatsheaf and secure me a place. Box seat, mind."

"You had better return inside," said Mrs. Halliwell to her husband.

"What for? A fine evening, as this will be!"

"If you once catch your winter's cough, you know there's no getting rid of it until spring."

"I am not likely to catch it in September, Jane," returned the Major. "Box seat, Alfred, both ways."

"We are breakfasting later than usual," remarked Lucy. "I shall be late at school."

"I don't know how it was," observed the Major; "I meant to be down earlier than usual this morning. And I did get up in time. But there were so many hindrances; first one thing went wrong, then another. I could not find my things, and the trousers I first put on were the wrong ones, and I had to change them. Then I managed to overturn my shaving water, wetted my stockings, which I had to change also, and wait for more water. Altogether I never was so long getting up before; first one delay and then another; there was no end to it."

"Major," cried Aunt Copp, "this will be an unlucky day to you."

"It will be what?" echoed the Major.

"An unlucky day. Those retardings, those apparent accidents, don't come for nothing. You will hear bad news, or be crossed in some way."

"You were cut out for a sailor's wife, with your superstitions," laughed the Major. "I suppose you would not sail on a Friday for the sea and all that's on it."

"There you are wrong, then, Major, for I think Friday just as good as any other day. Only my husband never sails on a Friday, out of deference to the prejudices of the crew. But I'll tell you what I would not do—not sail at all, if things went cross and unlucky with me the first day of the voyage."

"Bravo!" said Major Halliwell.

"I was not superstitious by nature," returned Aunt Copp; "nobody less so. It

has been forced on me by experience. You see, now, whether this day won't have something wrong about it, and tell me to-night. *It was as if you ought not to dress ; as if some invisible power would warn you not to get up to what was before you.*"

"Well, London is before me to-day," returned the Major. "I'll look out for Mother Shipton's Prophecies in town, Becky, and bring them down. They'll just suit you."

About a quarter to eleven he wished them good-morning, and strolled leisurely towards the Wheatsheaf, the starting-place of the Harkaway. In a little while, however, they saw him coming back again, much more quickly.

"What's up now?" cried Aunt Copp. "He has forgotten something. Just like him."

"Look here," cried the Major, turning himself round before the window, and dis-

playing a large fracture in the sleeve of his coat.

"What a slashing rent!" exclaimed Aunt Copp. "How did you do that?"

"A nasty nail they had in the post of the horse-trough. I was leaning against it, watching the Harkaway load, and whilst talking to Gibbons I felt it tear."

"Shall I sew it up for you?" asked Aunt Copp.

"No, thank you. That's sea fashion. Land fashion is to change it for another. Hester, run upstairs, and bring me the coat you will find in the bottom drawer."

Hester soon brought it, and her father put it on. Mrs. Halliwell and Aunt Copp lamented over the rent.

"It must go to the tailor's," said the Major. "Send it this morning, Jane."

"I think I could do it just as neatly as the tailor, papa," said Hester. "Shall I try?"

"Ay, child. If you do it well, I'll give you five shillings." And Hester's eyes brightened.

"Never was such a handy girl at her needle as that!" exclaimed Aunt Copp, looking at Hester. "She should see our cobbling on board."

"Good-bye, once again," cried the Major.

"Mind you bring the oysters with you," called out Mrs. Halliwell.

"And mind you come in time for supper," added Aunt Copp.

It was on the stroke of eleven, and Hester had begun her task, when they discerned the Major coming back again at full pelt.

"Well, if ever I knew such a thing as this!" ejaculated Aunt Copp, and she and Mrs. Halliwell ran out and met him half way down the gravel walk.

"My pocket-book," panted the Major, "my pocket-book. I omitted to take it out

of the coat. Fetch it, one of you. It is in the breast-pocket."

Mrs. Halliwell went back to the house, but Rebecca Copp laid her hand upon her brother's shoulder.

"James, pray heed me for once. Do not go to-day. Stop at home, and go another day."

"In the name of wonder, what for?" demanded Major Halliwell. "I shall be in time."

"Don't you see how everything is contributing to keep you here? It is already past eleven, and you have been hindered going. Pray heed it."

"I never heard such rubbish in my life," cried the Major, almost irritably. "It is only fit to tell to a child."

"It is not rubbish," earnestly persisted Aunt Copp. "There was a ship, the *Whirlpool*, started from the London Docks.

Before she was well out of dock an accident happened to her rudder, and she had to put back for repair. Then she made a second start, dropped down to Gravesend, and went on. Before she reached Ramsgate a squall overtook her, damaged her rigging, and she had to put in there. Well, that was remedied, but it kept them three days—James, do listen ; what's the use of being impatient ? Away went the *Whirlpool* again, and reached Portsmouth, when it was discovered that an infectious fever had broken out on board. The passengers left the ship, she was fumigated, and in time many of them, not all, came on board again. *Not one* had died of the fever, but some of them had taken warning, and they said good-bye for ever to the *Whirlpool*. When she was ready for the start, our ship was lying alongside of her. My husband said to the captain, ‘Wilson, you'll never get her safe to the

other side.' ‘I have my doubts I shan’t,’ answered Captain Wilson; ‘it has been a bad beginning. Farewell, old comrade; we’ll shake hands hearty, though it should be for the last time.’ And it was the last, James,” added Mrs. Copp solemnly; “the *Whirlpool* started on her voyage, and she never was heard of again.”

Hester had drawn near and was listening, and Mrs. Halliwell now came running with the pocket-book. The Major snatched it from her. “Thank you, Jane,” he said; “I must run for it.”

He started off, but Mrs. Copp flew after him. “Major! James! for goodness’ sake,” she said, “don’t go to-day; everything is against you. I could tell you many similar instances. The *Whirlpool* is only one amongst——”

“*Whirlpool* be hanged!” interrupted the Major. “I am not a sailor, Becky. Let go

my coat-tails, or you'll have a fracture in them. The coach is waiting for me."

"A wilful man must have his way," cried Aunt Copp wrathfully. "Something will go wrong with him to-day, as sure as his name is James Halliwell. He will lose his pocket-book and all his money, or meet with some bad news in town, or make some fresh acquaintance that will lead to ill. It will be something. I know he ought not to have gone the journey. Come along, Hester; no good looking after him."

Aunt Copp returned towards the house as she spoke, and Hester slowly followed her. Presently, when they were seated at work, Alfred came running up the path, apparently in the height of enjoyment.

"You would have split your sides with laughing," he cried, springing to the window, "if you had seen the governor just now. When he got back, the coach was gone."

"Gone!" interrupted Aunt Copp.

"It was gone, and round the corner, and out of sight. So the Major was in a fix, and began calling the coachman unorthodox names. The butcher was standing at Gibbons's with his light cart, and he proposed to the Major to get in and they'd gallop on and catch it; and up he climbed, and off they went, I hanging on behind to see the fun. You should have heard us all hallooing when we came in view of the Harkaway."

"Did you catch it?"

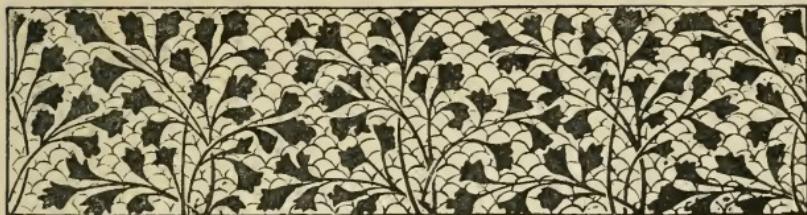
"It pulled up when it heard the row behind, and stopped for us. Jones was full of apologies, saying he had understood when Major Halliwell went off home the second time that he declined his place for that day. Wasn't the race fun!" added Alfred, swaying about with laughter. "I wish you had seen it."

"Then he is really gone?"

"Oh, yes; he is gone. Wells had possession of the box-seat, but he got out of it for the governor."

"Now I just ask you, Mrs. Halliwell, whether it does not seem that the Major *was not* to go?" demanded Aunt Copp, with emphasis. "Was not everything against it?"

"It does seem so," said Hester, looking up from her work, with a grave face. But Mrs. Halliwell only smiled, and Alfred ran off, saying something that they only half caught, about the superstitions of salt-water.



CHAPTER III.

THE END OF THE DAY.

THE day went on to evening. At half-past eight, the servant came in to lay the cloth for supper, that things might be in readiness for the Major and the oysters. Mary, of course, was in bed, and Lucy also went, for she had a bad headache, to which she was subject. Alfred had been out fishing, and was spending the evening at the house of one of his companions.

“What time do you say the coach gets in here?” demanded Aunt Copp.

“At a quarter to nine. And it never

varies five minutes," said Mrs. Halliwell. "The Harkaway is the fastest coach we have, and the most regular. Of course, excepting the mail."

"It may be a little behind to-night, ma'am," remarked John, "as it will have a heavy load. So many folks will be a-coming down to the fair."

"I suppose they will," answered his mistress.

"I was with you here at fair-time four years ago," observed Mrs. Copp, "and left the following day. Do you remember it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Halliwell. "And poor little Frederick got the ring of a penny candlestick on his finger, and could not get it off again. Do you know, Rebecca, that finger was bad for four or five weeks. The ring had cut into the flesh, and, I suppose, poisoned it. I cannot think why they persist in holding this fair every September at Sea-

ford. Little or no business is done at it, and it is only a resort for the idle. They have talked of doing away with it."

"Doing away with the fair, mamma!" exclaimed Hester. "I hope not. What would become of our prospect of fairings?"

The time went on to nine, and the Major had not arrived, and it went on again till half-past.

"How late it will be for supper!" exclaimed Aunt Copp. "Especially if we wait for the oysters to be opened."

"I think it will be better to take our supper at once of the cold beef, and not have the oysters till to-morrow."

"Decidedly best," said Aunt Copp. "I'll ring for John to draw the ale."

John brought it in, and they sat down to supper. "Where's Hester, I wonder?" cried Mrs. Halliwell.

"She's standing at the hall-door, ma'am," said John.

"Call her."

He went out and came back again. "Miss Hester says she don't want any supper, ma'am. I think she's listening for the coach."

"Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell, as the man left the room, "you have frightened Hester."

"Frightened her!"

"Prophesying ill-luck to her papa to-day. You don't know how sensitive she is."

"Not she," answered Aunt Copp; "she is too sensible a girl to be sensitive. She has double the sense that most girls have."

"Yes, she has; but she is wonderfully sensitive with it. She has so much delicacy of feeling—so much imagination. I'm sure, if you could lay your hand on her heart now, you would feel it going pit-a-pat at a great

rate ; and it will not cease till she sees her papa safe at home again."

Aunt Copp went to the dining-room door.
"Hester."

Hester came in. "Who called me?" she asked.

"What are you doing there, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing, Aunt Copp."

"You are listening for the coach, Hester," said her mother.

The colour flushed into Hester's cheeks.
"It is sure not to be long now, mamma."

"What a ridiculous idea of yours, Hester, to be standing there!" cried Aunt Copp.
"As if you could hear the coach come up to the Wheatsheaf, all this way off."

"We do hear it, aunt, on a still night. And if the guard blows his horn, as he generally does, we can hear that in this room."

"Sit down, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell,
"and take your supper."

"Mamma, I cannot eat, thank you. I am not hungry."

"Sit down and take your supper," added Aunt Copp peremptorily. "What's the good of your fretting yourself to fiddle-strings over that coach? It will come in all right. This beef is excellent."

Hester sat down and tried to eat, but she could not: she was "not hungry." This was just Hester: if anything troubled her she could never eat: outwardly silent, inwardly agitated. Mrs. Halliwell glanced at her, and then across the table at Aunt Copp. The latter was looking at Hester.

"Leave it, leave it," said Mrs. Halliwell. "I see you do not want it." And Hester, with a sigh of relief, laid down her knife and fork.

Mrs. Halliwell and her sister-in-law talked on cheerfully; first one topic was started, then another; *their* minds were evidently at

rest. Aunt Copp seemed to have forgotten her sombre prognostications of the morning, and Mrs. Halliwell had never had any. The clock was striking ten when a footstep was heard outside, on the gravel.

"Here he is!" triumphantly exclaimed Aunt Copp.

"That is Alfred's footstep," dissented Hester. "It is too light and quick for papa's. How fast he is running!"

Alfred burst into the room. "Mother! Aunt Copp! they are saying that something is amiss with the Harkaway."

"What is amiss with it?"

"No one seems to know. I only heard a word, and came on to tell you."

"It's upset for a guinea!" cried Aunt Copp, "and he'll come home with his arm in a sling. He will believe me another time. Just look at Hester! If ever I saw such a girl!"

Hester's face had turned white and rigid. She stood with her hands pressed upon her chest. But she spoke calmly :

"Mamma, I should like to go and hear what it is. Anything is better than suspense. Let me."

"I'll go too," said Aunt Copp. "Where's that shawl I had on in the garden? Oh, here. Hester, here's your mamma's. Throw it over your shoulders."

They went rapidly down the walk, Alfred with them. Aunt Copp talked incessantly, but Hester never spoke. Before the Wheatsheaf inn five or six persons were gathered. Aunt Copp marched into the midst of them. "How d'ye do, Mr. Gibbons? Has anything happened to the Harkaway?"

"Your servant, ma'am," answered the landlord. "We are afraid there has."

"Then you don't know it?"

"Ma'am, we have not heard anything;

but the Harkaway never was an hour behind time before."

"I never knew it more than ten minutes out since it took to run," added the landlady, who wore a smart cap, with blue ribbons. "Jones is the best time-keeper on the road. There's one thing to be said—he is sure to have a good load to-night."

"He wouldn't be an hour out of his time for any load as ever went on the coach, he wouldn't," said the landlord.

"Will you please to walk into our private parlour, and sit down, ladies?" asked Mrs. Gibbons. "You are waiting for the Major?"

"I don't know but I will," said Aunt Copp, to whom all places were alike. "He——"

"Here it comes," interrupted one of the group.

"No, it don't," said the landlord, putting

down his ear, "that ain't the rattle of the coach. It sounds more like Thorn's gig."

"Where's Thorn gone to to-day?" asked a spectator.

"Went over to Crummerton this afternoon, to look at some stock," chimed in the ostler.

A gig came rattling up to them, and pulled up. It contained Farmer Thorn and his bailiff. The landlord advanced before the farmer had time to speak.

"I say, Mr. Thorn, have you seen or heard aught of the Harkaway?"

"Yes, heard rather too much. Two glasses of ale, Mrs. Gibbons, please. It has met with a nasty accident."

"What accident?" roared a chorus of voices, Aunt Copp's the loudest.

"It was overturned coming down Crummerton Hill. Nobody but a foolhardy man would have loaded it as Jones did to-night."

He kept taking up on the road, and taking up, till they say he had six-and-twenty there, inside and out, and a dreadful heap of luggage. I say he must have been making free with the tap. It was the weight that caused the accident ; the horses could not bear up against it."

" What damage is done ?"

" Well, some of the passengers are not hurt at all, and some, they say, are hurt badly. We drove up about five minutes after it had happened, and came on as quickly as we could to send Davis."

" Is he gone ?"

Mr. Thorn nodded. " They had one doctor there, but the landlady was crying out for more, so I came and packed off Davis at once."

Hester stepped forward, speaking calmly. " Mr. Thorn, do you happen to know whether papa was one of those hurt ?"

Mr. Thorn, who was raising his ale to his lips, paused and looked at her.

"Why—is not that one of the Miss Halli-wells?"

"Yes," answered Hester.

"My dear, I never saw your papa. I did not know he was there."

"I don't think as the Major was there," interposed the bluff voice of the bailiff. "I never see him nor heered his name."

"He was sure to be there," said the landlord. "He took his place this morning to come back to-night."

"Did you see all the passengers?" inquired Alfred.

"No," said the farmer. "Three or four, that were badly hurt, they had carried in before we came up. One had his leg broken, they said, and Jones was insensible. The guard has got off scot free. Some of the passengers are on the road, walking on here."

Mr. Thorn handed back his glass, his bailiff did the same, and they drove on ; but the farmer checked his horse suddenly, and called for Miss Halliwell.

“Don’t alarm yourself, my dear,” he said, in a kindly tone. “There are no lives lost. Remember that.”

Aunt Copp would have stopped gossiping all night, waiting for the passengers who were advertised as being on the road ; but Hester, who was shivering inwardly, drew her away.

“Aunt, I shall go on to Crummerton,” she whispered.

“Nonsense, Hester !”

“I do not want you to go with me. I am not afraid of lonely roads to-night.”

“It’s three miles off,” retorted Aunt Copp, “and not a single roadside house between here and there. The passengers will be up directly, Hester : you heard that man in the

gig say they were coming. I dare say your papa will be one of them. He is an old soldier, and does not care for trifles."

"He said papa was *not* one of them," she answered. "Perhaps—perhaps—he may be one of those badly hurt. Oh, aunt! perhaps he may be dying!"

Aunt Copp was silent for a minute. "It may be as well to go," she said. "I have no bonnet; but my cap is pretty thick, and the night is warm. Alfred, run and tell your mamma what we have heard."

"I am going to Crummerton," answered Alfred.

"Now that's just because we are," irascibly cried Aunt Copp. "You know how impatiently your mother is waiting for news. We were to tell her the instant we knew anything."

"I did not know you were going to Crummerton," returned Alfred. "I shall go."

"Well, run home first. Your long legs will soon catch us up. When your mother knows, she can do as she likes about following. Tell her the man in the gig did not hear your papa mentioned, so we are hoping he stopped in London."

It was a starlight night, and Mrs. Copp and Hester walked on without meeting a soul. About a mile beyond Seaford, they met a labouring man, running fast, who stared as he came up to them, but did not stop.

"Where are you going to?" demanded Aunt Copp. "What do you want?"

"What's that to you?" returned the man. "Mind your own business."

"Well, I'm sure!" ejaculated Aunt Copp. "You might keep a civil tongue in your head when a lady speaks to you."

"A lady!—Oh!" was the rejoinder. "I should say as it's civil enough for two tramps,

as is abroad without their bonnets, at night-time."

"Two tramps! Hester, did you hear that? Your papa shall have him put in the stocks to-morrow. Do you know the fellow?"

Hester stepped before her aunt. Girl as she was, agitated as she was, she possessed far more common sense. "Wait one instant," she said to the man; "I think you are John Cooper. You came to make hay this summer at Major Halliwell's."

"What if I did?" he returned.

"I am Miss Halliwell."

The man peered at her in the dusk.

"Papa — Major Halliwell — was coming home to-night on the Harkaway, and an accident has happened to it at Crummerton. We thought you might be running to get assistance for the passengers."

"Miss," said the man, taking off his hat,

“I am sorry to have spoke so, and I ask your pardon. I never thought it could be ladies, and——”

“That is nothing,” interrupted Hester; “you could not know us, of course. Were you going to Seaford for assistance?”

“I have not heered nothing about it, miss. My wife is took bad to-night, and I was a-running for the parish doctor.”

“Oh, then we will not keep you. Good-night.”

“That’s so much time lost,” said Aunt Copp. “What a bear of a man!”

They sped on again. Now a high hedge was passed, now the turning to a lane, now a bit of darksome road, where the trees met overhead. Alfred did not overtake them, and soon the sound of voices was heard.

“What can this be?” whispered Aunt Copp.

Hester did not need to echo it; her beating

heart had told her. A turning in the road brought them in view of three men and a woman. Their eager eyes saw that Major Halliwell was not one of them.

"You are some of the passengers by the Harkaway," said Aunt Copp, meeting them. "Do you happen to know whether Major Halliwell was on it?"

They were all strangers, and did not know Major Halliwell, so could not answer the question.

"A merry gentleman with a bald head," said Aunt Copp. "Plum-coloured coat, and had a barrel of oysters with him."

"There was a barrel of oysters on the coach," cried the woman. "My elbow was sore with leaning on it. We was so wedged in together, such a lot of us! It was a shame. The driver ought to be 'prisoned for taking up so many passengers. We might just as well have lost our lives as not."

"He would probably be sitting on the box-seat," interposed Hester. "A gentleman of middle height and rather stout. Do you remember?"

"There was a gentleman something like that a-sitting by the coachman," observed one of the men. "He joked a good deal. I think he was one of those hurt and carried in."

They went on again. More hedges, more trees, more vistas of lonely lanes, and more dark night. Other voices were heard now, five or six more of the passengers. Hester recognised one and sprang towards him. It was the gamekeeper at Seaford Park: the servant left in charge, with his wife, during the Earl of Seaford's absence abroad.

"Wells," she said, "is papa hurt?"

"I'm afeared he is, miss," returned the man. "He were in front with Jones, and were throwed right off, they say on his head."

"Was he sensible?" inquired Aunt Copp.

"Not yet, ma'am. I was a bringing you word, now, of the accident. The guard asked me to call with the news."

Hester strove to speak, but her pale lips refused, at first, to utter a sound. "Who is with him, Wells?"

"There was several hurt, miss, and two doctors is with them. Mr. Davis is one."

On they went again, and came near to Crummerton. It was not a village. A few farm-houses were scattered in it far apart, and one public-house lay by the roadside about half-way up the hill—a long steep, winding hill, dangerous at all times, but especially so for a coach too heavily laden. Mrs. Copp and Hester began to ascend it, in silence. As they neared the public-house, Hester went to the opposite side and looked up at the windows. A light was burning in every room ; but that told her nothing.

"Take care, Hester," called out her aunt.
"You'll be run over."

A post-chaise had come from the direction of Seaford, very quickly. The post-boy whipped up his horses and would not let them slacken at the hill. It drew up at the inn-door, and Hester recognised it as coming from the Seaford Arms.

"Hester," exclaimed Aunt Copp, "I do believe it is your mamma."

It was; and Alfred. The four entered the house together, and the first person they saw was Mr. Davis. He took Mrs. Halliwell's hand in silence. Hester glanced at the expression of his face, and her heart sank within her.

He led them into the room. Oh, what a scene it was! Major Halliwell was laid on the bed, not dead, but dying. He had never moved since the accident. He never would move again.

"Is there any chance of his life?" whispered Aunt Copp to Mr. Davis.

"None. By morning he will be gone. The skull is fractured."

"The Lord forgive him!" wailed Aunt Copp, as she sat down on a low stool and burst into tears. "And he would not heed me!"

The funeral was attended by half Seaford. The body had been taken home, after the inquest, and from there it was buried. Not only was Major Halliwell universally respected, but the circumstances of his death excited wide sympathy; and thus the village, unasked, followed his remains. The other passengers were recovering; even Jones, the coachman, was progressing favourably. The family were together the evening of the funeral, all excepting Jane; she, poor thing, had sailed and knew nothing of the accident.

A relative of the Major's, a Mr. Halliwell from Middlebury, a town situated towards the west of England, who had arrived for the funeral, was with them.

"I wish you could manage to remain a few days with us," Mrs. Halliwell was saying to him, in a tearful voice. "There are many matters to attend to, and I am quite ignorant of business."

"I should only be too glad to do so, if it were possible," replied Mr. Halliwell. "But my late harvest is not in, and I have no one, just now, to overlook in my place. Dean, my manager and bailiff, died, as I told you, only a fortnight ago, and Tom is not old enough to be of any use. The very hour we have got it in, I will return here and render you any service in my power."

"There is one thing we seem to have forgotten," cried Aunt Copp, looking at her

sister-in-law—"the will. Of course James made one."

"Oh yes, he made a will," answered Mrs. Halliwell. "I dare say it is in his bureau, with his private papers."

"I think it should be searched for," said Mr. Halliwell, "and read."

They rose and went upstairs, Mrs. Halliwell, her son, Aunt Copp, and their relative; leaving Hester, Lucy, and the little girl in the sitting-room. Melancholy enough they looked, poor children, in their deep mourning. Hester had felt the shocking blow, perhaps, more than all; yet she had retained the calmest exterior. She was leaning now with her head on her hand, a contraction of pain on her brow.

"What would be the consequence if papa had not made a will?" inquired Lucy.

"Very little, I should think," was the abstracted reply of Hester. "I don't know

what the law may empower in such a case, but I am sure none of us would take advantage one over the other."

Lucy looked up in surprise. "What advantage could we take? I do not understand."

The rest entered as she spoke, for the will had been speedily found. Mr. Halliwell proceeded to read it.

"This was made six years ago," said he, running his eyes over the date. "I suppose there is no later one."

"That is the last," said Mrs. Halliwell.

It was a perfectly just will, the will of an upright man. His wife's life was provided for, and his children were left equal shares, not one more than the other. Mr. Halliwell, as he folded it up, remarked that it was a just will.

"Of course," began Aunt Copp, "the first thing will be to withdraw the money from

that fire company, and put it in the Funds again."

"Yes," said Mrs. Halliwell, "I should wish it done."

"What are you talking of?" inquired Mr. Halliwell.

"Oh, long since that will was made, my brother drew out his money and invested it in some fire-insurance company," replied Aunt Copp; and her slighting tone appeared to almost cast reflection on the dead.

"All of it?"

"Every shilling. Except what was settled on the girls, which he couldn't touch: the two thousand pounds. Five hundred apiece, it will be, as Frances is dead, and there are only four of them."

"That comes to them at Mrs. Halliwell's death," observed Mr. Halliwell.

"Of course, at Mrs. Halliwell's death: not before," returned Aunt Copp. "Well,

every shilling but that is in the fire company."

"It is quite safe," spoke up Mrs. Halliwell, "and pays an excellent interest. Since it has been there our income has been half as large again."

"I do not like these sort of speculations," observed Mr. Halliwell.

"I hate them," added Aunt Copp.

"I would advise you to write to your lawyer immediately," he resumed to Mrs. Halliwell, "and let him give notice of the intended withdrawal of the money."

"I will," concluded Mrs. Halliwell.

Not one letter, but several, had to pass between the lawyer and Mrs. Halliwell. Fears were aroused. Something was wrong about the money or the company, and the lawyer could get at nothing satisfactory. Alfred went to London, Mrs. Halliwell went to London, Aunt Copp went to London, and

they had to return as they went. In a few weeks, when Mr. Halliwell again visited them, the worst was known.

"It's all gone," was Aunt Copp's shrieking salutation to him when he entered the house.

"So you wrote me word," he answered, with a long face. "Can nothing be drawn out of the wreck?—absolutely nothing?"

"Not the ghost of a sixpence," sobbed Aunt Copp; "the company has gone and made itself a bankrupt, and a pretty state of things has come to light. Why, they have been going on, all the while, on nothing but credit—and the Major's money! How he could have been so taken in, I can't think. A poor, credulous—— However, he is an angel now, so don't let us talk about it."

"Aunt Copp," said Hester, bursting into tears, "I cannot bear to hear you blame papa. He did it for the best."

"And a fine best it has turned out," said

Aunt Copp snappishly. "He always was a simpleton—don't frown, Hester. You cannot excuse such imprudence. What do you suppose is to become of you all?"

"We must try and support ourselves," answered Hester. "I must, I mean; Lucy and Mary are not old enough."

"Support a fiddlestick!" retorted Aunt Copp. "What are you all to live upon?—air? How is your mamma to keep house? How is Alfred to go to college?"

Hester put her hand to her brow.

"I do not see Mrs. Halliwell," interrupted their guest; "where is she?"

"In her bed, of course," answered Aunt Copp; "and no wonder, after such a blow. Some people would have had an apoplectic fit. Alfred is up in London again, but his going is of no earthly use. What assets do you suppose this precious company confessed to having, all told?"

“I don’t know.”

“One pound seventeen shillings and three-pence farthing.”

“They ought to be punished, those who have had the management of it,” returned Mr. Halliwell.

“Punished!” echoed Aunt Copp. “I should like to see them all hanging from our yard-arm.”

“Had the Major any debts?”

“Oh no, thank goodness—nothing of that sort.”

“And there is positively nothing left but that two thousand pounds settled on the girls?”

“Nothing else, except the furniture of this house, which is very old-fashioned. There may be a balance of a hundred pounds or so at the banker’s, after the funeral expenses shall have been paid.”

“It is a very gloomy prospect,” observed

Mr. Halliwell. “Mrs. Halliwell cannot exist and keep the children upon the interest of two thousand pounds.”

“Of course she can’t, any more than I could steer our ship without a compass. Mark me, girls,” added Aunt Copp, turning to her nieces, “you must make up your minds to years of struggle—if not to a life of it. I told your poor papa that when a man wilfully and recklessly risked his money, punishment was sure to follow. The Major had a comfortable income, but he grew dissatisfied, and thought he would speculate. There were two prospects before him: the one of undue wealth, gained quickly—more wealth than he could want; the other, the loss of all he had, and ruin to his family. His eyes were fixed upon the wealth, and he forgot the risk—and so the loss has come. Now, my dear children, such recklessness must be worked out; it is the natural—ay,

and the divine—order of things, that wrong and reckless doing must bring its consequences after it. Your poor, ill-judging father has gone, and upon you, through life, will these consequences fall."

In a little time, however, things looked brighter. Not that there was any prospect of the recovery of the money; that was irrevocably gone. Many years before, Major Halliwell had rendered a most essential service to the East India Company. He had not served under them, but it had fallen into his power to give them certain information of a valuable nature, and when they would have rewarded him he refused it. They communicated now with Mrs. Halliwell, and delicately informed her that a pension of two hundred a year would be paid her as long as she should live. Whether this was the private act of some two or three individuals, or whether it

emanated from the Company, Mrs. Halliwell never knew. She thought the former, especially as her husband had been, up to the time of his death, upon terms of intimate friendship with two of its members. The news was a great relief to all ; but upon none did it act as it did on Aunt Copp. Her spirits went up like mercury, and she began to contrive and plan, saying she would see them all straight and settled before she left.

"Let me see," said she : "you will have about two hundred and seventy pounds a year. Well, you may live beautifully on that."

"Compared with what we feared we might have to exist upon," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We may think now of Mr. Halliwell's generous offer to Alfred."

"What was that?" quickly asked Aunt Copp.

"I did not mention it; it appeared so impossible that we could avail ourselves of it. I was speaking of Alfred's great disappointment at not being able to return to Oxford, and Mr. Halliwell generously said that if there were a possibility of one-half being contributed towards his return, he would find the other half. So now, with some pinching at home, children," she added to her daughters, "Alfred may keep his terms."

"Oh, mamma!" cried Hester, her face in a glow, "let us live upon bread and cheese; pinch in any way, so that Alfred may succeed. His heart is set upon being a clergyman."

"I think my favourite theory, my trust, my belief, better than yours, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell.

"What is that?"

"That God takes care of the widow and

the orphan. See how merciful He has been to us! You would contend that their father's risking his money must entail punishment on the children."

"I did not say they would be crushed by it," rapidly responded Aunt Copp. "Never thought of such a thing: never would believe such a thing. God takes better care of us all than we deserve. I said that reckless acting of James's would entail struggles and difficulties upon the children. And I know it will do so. It *must* work out its own retribution."

"The first thing to be done is to look out for a small house," resumed Mrs. Halliwell, leaving the subject. "We must quit this one."

"There's one at the Seaford end of the village that will just suit," cried Aunt Copp.

Seaford was a straggling parish, not very populous. People had fallen into the habit

of calling only one end of the parish Seaford, and the other St. Jude's, because the new church, St. Jude's, was situated there.

"How do you know there is?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"Because I knew you must leave this, and have been keeping my eyes open. The rent is twenty-five pounds, and it's a nice genteel house, fit for a gentleman's family whose means are limited. The back windows open on a lovely little lawn and flower-beds, and there's a serviceable kitchen-garden beyond."

"I think Aunt Copp must mean Seaford Cottage," suggested Hester.

"Seaford Cottage; that's the very name. Won't it do, Mrs. Halliwell?"

"I really think it might," answered Mrs. Halliwell. "I did not know it was to let."

"Ah! what would you do without me?" cried Aunt Copp. "If you take it, I'll stay with you until I have moved you into it, for

you'd never get in without me. You are all the greatest set of incapables at business—except, perhaps, Hester ; and she has had no experience. And now I'll tell you what I have had running in my head. We shall be away about ten months this next voyage ; let me take Mary with me. I'd say Lucy, but I think she'd better finish up her education ; she does not know of what use it may be to her ; and Hester you'll want for sewing and household matters. You'll find enough to do, I can tell you, with only one servant. It would be a change for Mary, and during that time she would be no expense to you for clothes or anything."

" You are extremely kind, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell, with a smile ; " but a ship is not a fitting place for a little girl. She would learn the ways of the sailors."

" And to swear, perhaps," added Lucy, " as our cousin Sam has learnt."

Aunt Copp was exceedingly nettled. "Do you think I can't take care of a child? I should not let her go climbing up the ropes and mixing with the sailors, as Sam did."

"I think I must keep Mary at home," said Mrs. Halliwell, in her quiet way. "I could not part with her just now."

"You don't know what's good for her," returned Aunt Copp; "she is delicate, and a sea voyage would set her up for good. But as you please."

Seaford Cottage proved suitable, and Aunt Copp "settled them" in it before she left. In her own opinion, it was she who did everything; but the quiet usefulness and plain good sense of Hester effected more than she did. It appeared as though Hester had been made for usefulness. She had shown no turn for accomplishments. Music they tried her with, a quarter of a year, but she made nothing of it. A taste for drawing

she certainly had, but somehow she was never taught ; it must be remembered that accomplishments in those days were as rare as they are common now. Lucy's education was being conducted on a higher scale. But Hester was great in domestic qualities—her comfortable economy, her clever needle, and, above all, her aptitude in a sick room. Aunt Copp watched her with admiration, and gave her her meed of praise when she was leaving.

“ I told you you'd be nothing but an old maid, my dear ; but never mind, you will still be happy. A useful life brings its own satisfaction with it—and that's what your life will be.”



CHAPTER IV.

HESTER'S ROMANCE.

THE years went on, in their quiet cottage, till Alfred was of an age to be ordained. Lucy's education was well finished, and Mary's was progressing. Mrs. Pepper they heard from occasionally ; she liked much an Oriental life, but two children born to her had both died.

The last vacation before taking orders, when Alfred came home he brought a friend to spend it with him. The family had walked to meet the coach, and when it came, and Alfred jumped off it, a gentleman about his own age followed him.

"My friend, George Archer," he said; "you have heard me speak of him. And you, George, have heard of my sisters. These are two of them, Hester and Lucy."

What a handsome man he was, this stranger! Tall, fair, gentlemanly; with a low, sweet voice and a winning manner. He is often in Hester's mind's eye, as he looked that day, though so many, many years have now gone by.

Is like attracted by like? Rarely. No two persons could be much less similar than Hester and George Archer; and yet they were attracted to one another. He seemed formed to be one of the ornaments of the world, she to be of use: she was of slight figure, with a pleasant face and dark hair, but of beauty she had none; he was indeed one of the most attractive of men. Hester thought so then; and now that she can judge dispassionately, she thinks so still. We must

all have our romance in life, and Hester's had come for her before that vacation was over. He spoke out at once to Mrs. Halliwell.

She had no objection to give Hester to him, provided they would wait; but it seemed to her, she said, that they might have to wait for years. Hester's heart beat, and her colour went and came. Wait! if she waited till her hair was gray, what of that? To see each other occasionally, to be secure in each other's love, was not that sufficient bliss? She did not speak, but her colour deepened.

"Of course, my first year's curacy must be passed upon hope," said Mr. Archer, "but when that is over, why should luck not give me a living, as it does to other clergymen?"

"It does not always give one," observed Mrs. Halliwell. "You have no interest."

"Neither interest nor fortune," returned

Mr. Archer. “ My father is dead, and what came to me has been spent upon my education. Something like Alfred.”

“ And Hester has nothing. She will have five hundred pounds at my death ; but, were that to happen to-morrow——”

“ Oh, mamma !” interrupted Hester, “ do not talk of that.”

“ My dear child, talking of my death will not bring it on. I was about to say that were the money at your command to-morrow, you could not marry upon it.”

“ Certainly not,” said Mr. Archer. “ I should be the last to take Hester from a good home unless I had one equally good to offer her. I trust it may be a better, whenever it shall come.”

“ We have been accustomed to a better, until the last few years—if by that may be understood a more wealthy one,” said Mrs. Halliwell.

"Then I am to have her?" said George Archer.

"In prospective," answered Mrs. Halliwell with a smile. "And when you can show me a certainty of bread and cheese, you shall have her in reality."

Mrs. Halliwell was called from the room, and he cast his arms around Hester. "My darling, will you bear to wait for me?"

Bear to wait for him! Her glowing cheek told how willingly, though her tongue was silent.

It had been long talked of, and was now recently arranged, that the good old rector of Seaford, Mr. Coomes, should take Alfred Halliwell as curate. He was growing feeble now, and required one. The prospect of having Alfred close to them was delightful to his family, more especially to Mrs. Halliwell. It came to be hinted that this plan might be changed: who first thought or

spoke of it, Hester never knew; *she did not*: but it was whispered that instead of Alfred Halliwell being curate of Seaford, it might be George Archer. Mrs. Halliwell was startled. She did not like it. She spoke to Alfred; but he, light-hearted and good-natured, was ready to sacrifice anything and everything for his friend and his favourite sister. Mrs. Halliwell could not remonstrate openly against it: her old-fashioned notions of the extreme courtesy due to her son's guest forbade it: but she spoke privately to Hester: she thought the latter might have stopped it with a word. *That word Hester could not bring her heart to speak.* “Selfish! Selfish!” It is the reproach that has clung to her conscience since. Ay, and with cause.

“How Aunt Copp will be deceived, when she comes home and finds you are engaged!” exclaimed Lucy to her sister. “She will not

crow so much over her fortune-telling, for the future. Hester, I do believe she will be quite angry. She is so fully persuaded that you are not to marry."

Hester smiled, a quiet smile of happiness.

The time came, and they were ordained together. The Reverend Alfred Halliwell was appointed to a curacy in a remote district of North Wales, and the Reverend George Archer to Seaford.

He came. He read himself in on the last Sunday in Lent, the day preceding Passion Week. Seaford Church stood about midway between the village and the gates of Seaford Park. It was called the old church, in contradistinction to the new one, St. Jude's. It was a small, low, unpretending edifice, only one monument within it, and one handsome pew, and they belonged to the Earls of Seaford. As they walked into church that

day, which will ever be one of those left in Hester's memory, she did not look up, but she saw by intuition that George Archer was in the reading-desk, and the rector in his pew. Mr. Coomes, for that day, was only one of the congregation.

He began the service, and they stood up. It is one of the few remembered moments of agitation in Hester's life; her breath came fast, she saw nothing, and her face was white as the snow outside. It was a very early Easter, that year, and the snow lay on the ground. In poor Hester's foolish fancy, she thought everyone must be looking at her; as if the congregation, in their curiosity to look at and listen to him, regarded her! He had a persuasive voice, low and silvery, and though it did not tremble, he was certainly nervous in his new position, for his bright colour went and came.

When Hester gathered courage to look

round, she forgot everything in astonishment. Against the wall, under the one monument, facing the side of the pulpit, was the pew of the Earls of Seaford, with its brass rods and crimson curtains. During the four years they had gone to Seaford Church (previously they had attended St. Jude's), that pew had always been empty, and now it was occupied! Standing at the end was a young lady, just budding into womanhood, very beautiful; at the other end was a man of fifty, short, but of noble presence, with wrinkled brow and gray hair; and standing between these two were four lads, of various ages, from ten to sixteen or seventeen. The young lady's eyes were fixed on George Archer's face, and Hester could not take her gaze from hers. It was the sweetest face she had ever seen, with its exquisite features, its delicate bloom, and its dark, spiritual-looking eyes: it is the sweetest

face that ever rises to her memory. Hester glanced round at the large pew at the back, near the door: it was filled with male and female servants, some of them in the Seaford livery, and she knew then that it was the Earl of Seaford, his sons, and his daughter, the Lady Georgina.

Mr. Archer was to dine that day with the Halliwells, and Hester thought that he would accompany them home from church. But they had been in half an hour, and dinner was waiting to be served, when he entered. Lord Seaford had detained him in the vestry.

"I was surprised to see them," remarked Mrs. Halliwell. "They must have come down late last night. I thought they were not in England."

"They have been abroad these three years, the Earl told me," said Mr. Archer.

"And they have not been here for much longer than that. I did not recognise one of

the children, and scarcely Lord Seaford.
Was he pleasant with you?"

"Very much so. He invited me to the castle, and said Lady Seaford would be glad to see me; but that she was a great invalid."

"A very fine family," resumed Mrs. Halliwell. "The daughter is beautiful."

"Is she?" said Mr. Archer.

"Did you not think so?"

"To tell you the truth," said he, smiling, "I was thinking more about myself, and the impression I made, than taking in any impression likely to be made on me. My thoughts were running on whether I pleased Mr. Coomes and the congregation."

"I only trust Alfred will succeed as well," returned Mrs. Halliwell. "Was it your own sermon?"

"It was indeed," he said earnestly. "I have written many. I used to write them for practice at college."

Oh, those Sundays!—for Mrs. Halliwell generally invited him—their peaceful happiness will never be erased from Hester's memory. The intense, ecstatic sense of joy they reflected on her heart is a thing to be remembered in silence now, as it was borne then.

They went to church that evening, and Hester attended better than in the morning; more courage had come to her. The family from the castle were not there. After service Mr. Archer overtook them in the church-yard, and drew Hester's arm within his. Mrs. Halliwell expected him to walk with her: she was quite of the old school, and very particular with her daughters. However, she walked on with Lucy, and they followed, he pressing her hand in the dark night.

“Hester, dearest,” he whispered, “shall I do?”

“Do?” she repeated, scarcely heeding what he meant, in her weight of happiness. For it was the first time they had walked thus familiarly together.

“Shall I do for a clergyman, think you? Shall I read and preach well enough for them?”

He knew he would—there was conscious triumph in his voice as he spoke; what need for Hester to give him her assurance? Yet she tried to speak a timid word of congratulation.

He clasped her closer to him, he held her hand with a warmer pressure, he halted in the narrow path, and, raising her face to his, kissed it lovingly. “Oh, Hester, my dearest, how happy we are in each other!” he murmured; “how bright will be our future!”

Mrs. Halliwell called to them. Perhaps she missed the echo of their footsteps; perhaps she thought they were lingering

too far behind. “Mr. Archer, are you and Hester not walking slowly? It is very cold.” So he raised his face from hers, and they went on close to Mrs. Halliwell and Lucy.

“Oh!” cried poor Hester once, after the lapse of many years, “let me believe that he did indeed love me! I am an old woman now, and have struggled through a lonely life, carrying with me a bruised heart. But let me believe that my dream was real; that during its brief lasting, George Archer’s love for me was pure and true.”

Alfred Halliwell fell ill in June. He had been ailing ever since he went down to Wales. The weather, when he travelled, was severe, the place bleak, and he wrote word home that the cold seemed, from the first, to have struck on his chest and settled there. In June he grew worse, and wanted his mother to go down.

"I shall send you instead, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell, after pondering over his letter.

The hot colour flushed into Hester's face, and she looked up to remonstrate. What! send her away from Seaford, miles and miles, where she could never see *him*, hear his voice, or listen for his step! But a better feeling came over her, and the hasty words died away upon her lips: how could she refuse to comfort her sick brother?

"Hester is thinking of Mr. Archer," laughed Lucy. "Now, Hester, don't deny it; I can see it in your face. Look at it, mamma. She is indignant that anyone should be so unfeeling as to banish her from Seaford."

"Hester must remember that she is, in a remote degree, the cause of this illness of Alfred's. Had he been curate here, his indisposition would have been well attended to at first, and not suffered to get ahead."

Mrs. Halliwell's tone was mild, but Hester's conscience smote her. Lucy saw her downcast look.

"Mamma," she said, "let me go to Alfred instead of Hester."

Mrs. Halliwell shook her head. "It is not only that Hester is three years older than you, Lucy, but she has a steadiness of character and manner which you want. I can trust her to travel alone; you are too giddy."

"Why, you know we always said that Hester was cut out for an old maid, with her starched notions and sober ways," retorted Lucy, who was feeling angry. "I'm sure it is a mistake, her being married."

"A very good mistake," said Mrs. Halliwell.

So it was settled that Hester should visit Wales, and George Archer spoke with her about his prospects the evening before her

departure, spoke sanguinely. They were sitting in the garden. He was indulging in a chimera ; though neither thought it one then.

“ Do not deem me vain, Hester,” he said, “ if I tell you something I have never told you yet. It is our approaching separation that draws it from me.”

She turned her grave but sweet dark eyes towards him.

“ I believe that Lord and Lady Seaford took an extraordinary fancy to me. Something more than usual.”

“ I think they must have done so,” answered Hester. “ They had you with them so frequently during the fortnight of their stay.”

“ When they return here for the autumn—as they purpose doing—perhaps this liking for me may be improved to bring forth fruit,” he went on. “ He—Lord Seaford—may give me a living.”

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, "I think he is sure to do it. The idea never occurred to me before."

"The worst is, these noblemen have so many calls upon their patronage," continued Mr. Archer. "If one place drops in, a dozen candidates are ready for it."

"Your uncle is a clergyman, George," proceeded Hester; "could he not help you to something?"

"You mean my Uncle Elliot. No, he could do nothing. His living is a good one, but he has a large family of his own. Clergymen can rarely help one another to preferment. If the Earl will only take me in hand, I shall want no one else's help. I think he will."

"I am so glad you have told me. It will be something to dwell upon while I am away. There's mamma calling to us—that it is getting dark, and we are to come in."

He rose, and strained her to him, before they entered. "Mind you don't forget me while you are away," he whispered.

"No, no," she replied, dashing away a few tears from her eyes.

The Seafords had gone to town, after Easter, for the season and for Lady Georgina's presentation. It was said that she bore away the palm of beauty at the drawing-room ; that George IV., sated though he was with ladies' charms, had spoken publicly of her exceeding loveliness.

When Hester reached North Wales she found Alfred very ill ; but what he chiefly wanted was care—he called it coddling. He lodged with a mining overseer and his wife, who were attentive to him, in their rough, free way, but who had no knowledge of the cares and precautions necessary in illness. Hester's heart smote her when she saw the want of all comfort in the place, the contrast

it presented to the home he would have had at Seaford.

However, what was to be done now was to get him well. And Hester was one of those right and rare spirits who set themselves to make *the best* of present exigencies, to meet and grapple with whatever duties may arise. As it has pleased God, in His infinite wisdom, to allot to us all some especial talent of usefulness (though many, in their carelessness, go to their lives' end and never find out their own), so Hester believed that her humble one lay in being useful to others, particularly in nursing, tending and soothing the sick. She entered heartily on her task, and with the aid of warm weather, and another and a better Aid, she brought Alfred round again. By the end of August he was quite well, and she went back to Seaford.

It was a long journey for her: travelling

in those days was not what it is now ; but she halted at Shrewsbury. They had some very distant acquaintances living there, of whom they knew little more than the name, but Mrs. Halliwell had written to ask them to receive Hester, which they kindly did for a night, both going and returning. She left Shrewsbury early in the morning, and reached Seaford about eight in the evening.

She never doubted that George Archer would be waiting for her ; but they came flocking round the coach-door, and he was not there. Mrs. Halliwell, Lucy and Mary. It was a lovely summer's night ; the harvest moon near the full ; but a dark shade seemed to have fallen on Hester's spirit.

She did not inquire after him—when the heart truly loves, it is always timid—yet they talked a great deal during the walk home, and at supper. Chiefly about Alfred : the situation of his home, the sort of people with

whom he lived, his parish duties, and the family at Shrewsbury ; it seemed they never would tire of asking Hester questions, one upon another. But when she and Lucy went up to their bedroom for the night, she put on an indifferent manner, and inquired if they saw much of Mr. Archer.

“ Not so much as when you were at home, of course,” laughed Lucy, “ his attraction was gone. And, latterly, very little indeed. Since the Seafords came, he is often with them. And he is reading with Lord Sale and Master Harry Seaford. They go to him every day.”

“ Are the Seafords at the castle, then ?”

“ They came in July. Parliament rose early ; the King went to Brighton, and all the grandees followed his example, and left town. We get all the ‘fashionable intelligence’ here now, Hester.”

“ Did he know I was expected to-night ?”

“The King?”

“Don’t joke, Lucy,” pleaded Hester, “I am tired. You know I meant Mr. Archer.”

“Yes, he knew it. We met him this morning, and Mary told him, and I wonder he did not go with us to meet the coach. Perhaps he is dining at the castle; the Earl asks him sometimes. Very dangerous to throw him into the society of that resplendent Lady Georgina.”

“Dangerous?”

“Well, it would be, I should say, if he were not cased round with your armour.”

“How much more nonsense, Lucy? One so exalted and beautiful as Lady Georgina!”

“That’s just it, her beauty,” laughed Lucy. “I will defy the lowliest curate in the Church to be brought within its radius, and not be touched with it. Nevertheless, I suppose you will have your adorer here to-morrow morning, as constant as ever.”

And he came. No one was in the room, and he clasped Hester to his breast and kissed her tenderly. Her two months' absence were amply repaid by his looks and words of love.

"I thought to have seen you last night," she whispered.

"So did I, Hester. I had been copying some music for Lady Georgina, and went to the castle with it, after dinner; and the Countess, and some of them, kept me talking till past ten. I was thunderstruck when I took out my watch, for I did not think I had been there an hour."

In his coveted presence, with his tender words, with his looks of love, how could Hester conjure up uneasy thoughts? And what had grated on her feelings in this last speech, she drove away.

Mrs. Halliwell had made acquaintance with the housekeeper at the castle, a reduced

gentlewoman, whose husband had also been in the army. Mrs. Stannard had taken tea with them once or twice, and it was from her Lucy received what she styled her “fashionable intelligence.”

One morning, about a week after Hester’s return, Mrs. Stannard called, and asked if she would like to go to the castle and teach English to the little Lady Ellen Seaford. This child, the youngest of the family, had a Swiss governess, but no one, just then, to teach her English. Lady Seaford was lamenting this in the hearing of Mrs. Stannard, and the latter thought of Miss Halliwell.

Hester was electrified—frightened—at the proposal. “I am not competent to be a governess; I don’t know anything; I never played a note of music,” she breathlessly said.

“It is only for English, my dear,” said Mrs. Stannard; “I am sure you must be

quite competent to teach that. They don't want music or any other accomplishment. Your going to the castle for two or three hours a day would be quite pastime, and you would be paid well."

So it was decided that Hester should go, each day, from half-past two to five, to give Lady Ellen Seaford English lessons. She entered on her duties the following Monday, and went up to the old castle with fear and trembling, wondering what real lords and ladies were like in social intercourse, and how they would accost her, and what she should answer; wondering whether she should have to sit in a saloon, all gilding and mirrors. "The goose I was!" poor Hester said afterwards. The schoolroom was plain, almost bare, and the lords and ladies were just like other people; free and unceremonious in their speech and manners to each other, as the children had been in her own home.

The Countess was a tall, grand woman, quiet and reserved. None of her children resembled her, excepting Viscount Sale. She was wrapped in a thick shawl, though the day was hot, and looked pale and ill. One day, in that first week, Lady Georgina came into the room while the little girl was reading, and Hester rose to receive her.

“Don’t let me disturb you,” she said, in a pleasant, careless tone. “Miss Halliwell, I presume. Has my sister nearly finished reading?”

“Yes,” interrupted Lady Ellen, shutting the book of her own accord. “I have read a page, and that’s enough. The words are hard, and I don’t like it.”

Hester knew that the child had not read half enough, but she doubted whether it was her place to differ from her, and at that early stage did not dare to do so. She stood in hesitation.

"Miss Halliwell," said Lady Georgina, bringing forward a huge portfolio, "do you know how to mount handscreens? Look at this pair which I have begun. I am not making a good task of them. Can you help me? Mademoiselle knows no more about it than this child. Ellen, let my paintings alone."

As it happened, Hester did know something of the work. She had a natural taste for it, and for drawing. When a child, she would spend hours copying the landscapes on an old china tea-set, and any other pretty view that came in her way. George Archer once found one of her old drawings, and kept it, saying he should keep it for ever. Poor Hester!

She told Lady Georgina she believed she could assist her, but that the little girl had only just begun her studies.

"Oh, her studies are of no consequence

for one day," remarked Lady Georgina, in a peremptory tone. " Nelly, dear, go to mademoiselle ; my compliments, and I am monopolizing Miss Halliwell this afternoon."

The child went out of the room, glad to be dismissed. She disliked learning English, and had told Hester that her French lessons were much less difficult to her.

" Do you cut the gilt paper out on a trencher or with scissors ?" asked Lady Georgina. " For the flowers, I mean."

Before Hester could answer, a merry-looking boy of fifteen, or rather more, looked into the room, and then sprang in. It was the Honourable Harry Seaford.

" I say, Georgy, are you in this place ? I have been all over the house after you. Who was to think you had turned school-girl again ? What are you up to, here ?"

" Why do you ask ?" inquired Lady

Georgina, without raising her eyes from the screens.

"Papa wants to know if you mean to ride with him this afternoon, and he sent me to find you."

"No," she replied. "Tell papa it will be scarcely worth while, for I must begin to dress in an hour. And I am busy."

"You can go and tell him yourself, Madam Georgy. There's Wells with my pointer, and I want to catch him."

"Where is papa?"

"Oh, I don't know; in the library, or somewhere."

He had vaulted downstairs as he spoke, and Hester saw him tearing after the game-keeper.

Lady Georgina left the room, Hester supposed to find the Earl. When she returned, she halted before a mirror that was let into the panel between the windows, and turned

some of her flowing curls round her finger. Her sylph-like form, her fair neck and arms—for it was not the custom then for young ladies to have these covered, even in morning dress—her bright hair, her patrician features, their damask bloom, and the flash of conscious triumph lighting her eye! Very conscious of her fascinations was the Lady Georgina Seaford. She caught Hester's earnest gaze of admiration, and turned sharply round.

“What are you thinking of, Miss Halliwell?”

The question startled Hester. She supposed, in her timid ignorance, that she must confess the truth, when a noble lady asked it. So she stammered out her thoughts—that until she saw the Lady Georgina she had not imagined it possible for anyone to be so lovely.

“You must be given to flattery in this

part of the world," was the young lady's answer, with a laugh and blush of conscious vanity. "Another, here, has avowed the same to me, and I advised *him* not to come to the castle too often, if there were a danger that I should turn his head."

Who was that other? A painful conviction shot over Hester that it was Mr. Archer.

Lady Georgina seemed quite a creature of impulse, indulged and wilful. Before she had sat twenty minutes, she pushed the drawings together, said it was stupid work, and they would go on with it another day. So the little girl came back again.

At five o'clock Hester was putting on her bonnet to leave, when Lady Georgina re-entered the room, in full dress. They were going out to dinner. An Indian muslin frock, with blue floss trimming, a blue band round her slender waist, with a pearl buckle, pearl

side-combs in her hair, a pearl necklace, and long white kid gloves. It was the mode of dress then—and a very pretty one.

“Nelly,” she said to her sister, “I want you to give a message to the boys.” And she bent down and whispered the child.

“William or Harry?” asked the little girl aloud.

“Oh, Harry,” replied Lady Georgina. “William would not trouble himself to remember.”

She left the room again. What the purport of her whisper was, of course Hester did not know. Mademoiselle Berri, the Swiss governess, was in the room then, writing, and when Lady Ellen ran to the window and got upon a chair to lean out of it, she quitted the table, pulled the child back, and said something in French—very fast, as it sounded to Hester, and the child replied equally fast. She could not under-

stand their language, but it seemed to her that they were disputing.

"Miss Halliwell will hold me, then," said the little girl in English, "for I *will* look. I want to see Georgy get into the carriage. Please hold me by my frock, Miss Halliwell."

Hester laid hold of the child by the gathers of her buff gingham dress, and the governess began to talk to her. Hester laughed and shook her head. "What does mademoiselle say?" she inquired of Lady Ellen.

"Oh, it's about a little girl she knew falling out of a window and breaking her *reins*. It is all a *conte*, you know; she says it to frighten me. What do you call *reins* in English? There's Georgy; she has on mamma's Indian shawl."

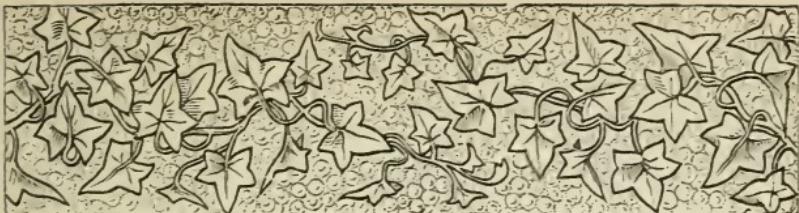
Hester bent forward over the head of the child. The bright curls of Lady Georgina were just flitting into the carriage, and something yellow gleamed from her shoulders.

It was the Indian shawl. The Earl stepped in after her, and, following him, in his black evening suit and white cravat, went George Archer. Hester's heart stood still.

"I wish dear mamma was well enough to go out again," sighed the little girl. "Georgy has all the visiting now."

She remained looking after the carriage, and Hester remained holding her. They saw it sweep round to gain the broad drive of the park. Lord Seaford was seated by the side of his daughter, and *he* opposite to her.





CHAPTER V.

THE LADY GEORGINA.

AUTUMN and winter passed away, and it drew very close to the anniversary of the period when Mr. Archer first became curate. There was no outward change in his position with regard to Hester; to the few in the family confidence the Reverend George Archer was still the engaged lover of Miss Halliwell. But a change *had* come, and they both knew it.

It seemed that a barrier had been gradually, and almost imperceptibly, growing up between them. He was cold and absent

in manner when with Hester, and his visits to Mrs. Halliwell's were not frequent. He appeared to be rising above his position, leaving Hester far beneath. Mr. Coomes was ailing, rarely accepted the dinner or evening invitations sent him, and since the Earl's stay at the castle, much visiting had been going on. So the county gentlemen would say, "Then you will come and say grace for us, Archer," and he always went. It would sometimes happen, when they were going a distance, as on this day, that Lord Seaford invited him to a seat in his carriage; and he was often now a guest at the castle. It has been said he was a handsome man; he was well-informed, elegant and refined; as a clergyman he was regarded as in some degree an equal by the society so much above him, and he was courted and caressed from many sides. Thus it was that he acquired a false estimation of his own

position, and ambitious pride obtained rule in his heart. But not for all this was he neglecting Hester. No, no ; there was another and a deeper cause.

Easter was later this spring than the last, and on its turn the Seafords were to depart for town. Hester's duties at the castle would conclude the Thursday in Passion Week ; and it may be mentioned that, over and above the remuneration paid her, which was handsome, the Countess pressed upon her a gold and enamel bracelet, which Mrs. Halliwell said must have cost a small fortune. Hester has it still ; but it is not fashioned as those worn now.

Thursday came, Hester's last day, and after their early dinner she set off to walk to the castle. A rumour had reached her that afternoon that Mr. Archer had thrown up his curacy. His year had been out three weeks, but he had agreed to remain on,

waiting for something better, at a stipend of a hundred a year. Hester had been looking forward to the departure of the Seafords with a vague hope that the old, loving, confidential days might return ; and now this rumour ! It seemed as if there was to be no hope for her in this cruel world, and she sat down to the lessons of little Ellen Seaford as one in a troubled maze. Before they were over, Mademoiselle Berri came in and told the child to go to her mamma : some visitors had called who wished to see her.

“ You will stay to take de thé wid me dis afternoon,” said mademoiselle, who had now made some progress in English.

“ No, thank you,” answered Hester. “ My head aches, and I want to get home.”

“ You cannot go till Madame la Comtesse has seen you : she did say so. Ah, but it is triste in dis campagne ! I have de headache

too, wid it. I shall have de glad heart next week to quit it."

" You have always found it dull, mademoiselle ?"

" As if anyone was capable to find it anything else ! Except it is de Lady Georgina. And perhaps de Earl, wid his steward, and his shooting, and his af-fairs. But for de Lady Georgina, she does keep herself alive wid flirting, as she would anywhere. She is de regular flirt."

" But then she is so very beautiful."

" Eh bien, oui, if she would dress like one Christian. But de English don't know how ; wid deir bare necks and deir curled hair. Dere is no race in de world who ought to put on clothes, Miss Halliwell, but de French women."

" Lady Georgina always looks well," sighed Hester. Was it a sigh of jealousy ?

" For de fashions here, she do," answered

mademoiselle, shrugging her shoulders at the “fashions here.” “But she has got de vanity! And not no mercy. She has turned de head of dat poor young minister, and——”

Something like a great spasm took Hester’s throat. “Do you mean Mr. Archer?” she interrupted.

“To be sure. One can see dat his heart is breaking for her. And she leads him on—leads him on. I do tink she loves him one little bit—but I only whisper dis to you, my dear, for de Earl and de Comtesse would give me chivy if dey heard me. But when she has amused herself to her fancy, she will just laugh at him, and marry. It is her fiancé dat is de handsome man.”

Hester’s heart leaped into her mouth. “Is Lady Georgina Seaford engaged?” she burst forth.

“You do seem surprised,” cried the French-

woman. "She is to have Mr. Caudour. He is my Lord Caudour's eldest son, and is now abroad wid some of de embassies. Dat is why he has never been here. He is some years older dan she, but it is de good *parti* for her, and dey will be married dis summer."

Mademoiselle talked on, thinking Hester listened, but she heard no more. A weight was taken from her heart. And yet, with what reason? For to couple a lowly curate with the Lady Georgina Seaford was ridiculously absurd, and her good sense told her so. She had to wait to see the Countess; it was the evening she gave her the bracelet; and it was nearly six when she left the castle.

The evening is in her memory now. It was still and balmy, and the sun was drawing towards its setting. She took the slanting cut through the park, which was the shortest way, and, in hastening along the narrow path,

where the trees hung thickly overhead, she came face to face with Mr. Archer. He was going there to dinner: she saw it by his dress. He shook hands in a constrained manner, and then there was a silence between them, as there often had been of late. Some power—Hester has never thought it was her own—nerved her to speak.

“I wanted to see you. I am glad we have met. We heard this afternoon that you had given up your curacy. Is it so?”

“Yes,” he answered, breaking off a switch from one of the trees, and beginning to strip it with the air of a man who knows not what he is about, while he kept his face turned from Hester.

“Then you have heard of another,” she said.

“I have accepted what may lead to something better than a curacy,” he replied, tearing away at the stick. “The post of resident tutor to the young Seafords.”

Was it a spasm, now, that fell on Hester's heart? Ay, one of ice. "Then you leave here; you go with them?" she faltered.

"When they leave next week I shall have to accompany them. We must temporarily part, Hester."

"Temporarily!" Calm as was Hester's general nature, there have been moments in her life when she has been goaded to vehemence. This was one of them. "Let us not part to-night without an explanation, Mr. Archer," she broke forth. "Is it me you love, or is it Lady Georgina Seaford?"

The red light from the setting sun was on them, for, in talking, they had moved restlessly to the opening in the trees, and the landscape lay full around, but the warm colour did not equal the glow on his face. Hester *saw* he loved the Lady Georgina: far more passionately than he had ever loved her. He stood in hesitation, like a guilty

coward, and no words would arise at his bidding.

“Shall I give you back your freedom?” uttered Hester: “I see we can no longer be anything to each other. I wish, from my heart, we had never been.”

“Hester,” he exclaimed, suddenly taking both her hands, “you would be well quit of me. A man with the unstable heart that mine has proved would never bring you happiness. Curse my memory, in future, as you will: I well deserve it.”

“But what do you promise yourself, to have become enthralled with *her*, so immeasurably above you?” was wrung from Hester, in her emotion.

“I promise myself nothing. I only know that I can live but in her presence, that she is to me in the light of an angel from Heaven. May it forgive my infatuation!”

“You need forgiveness,” whispered Hester.

"To indulge a passion for one who will soon be the wife of another."

"Of whom?" fiercely asked the young minister. The glow on his face had faded, and his lips were so strained that the teeth were seen—he who never showed them.

"She is to marry Lord Caudour's son."

"Ah, that's nothing, if you mean him," he answered, drawing his breath again. "She has told me she dislikes him. And though her father desires the match, he will not force her inclinations."

"Then you wish your freedom back from me?"

And poor Hester's lips, as she asked this, were as white as his own.

"Pardon my fickleness, Hester! I *cannot* marry you, loving another."

"Then I give it you," she continued, in a sort of wild desperation. "May the wife you choose never cause you to regret me."

"Thanks, from me, would be like a mockery," he whispered ; "I can only hope that you will find your reward. Let us shake hands, Hester, for the last time."

She held out her right hand. And he took it in his, and bent down his forehead upon it, and kept it there. Hester saw his lips move ; she thought he was praying for her welfare.

He pray !

They walked away in opposite directions ; but soon Hester stopped, and looked after him. He was striding on. He never turned ; and, as he approached the bend in the path, which would hide him from her sight, he flung the little switch away, with a sharp, determined gesture, as he had just flung away her love. Oh, the misery that overwhelmed that unhappy girl ! The dreadful blank that had fallen on her ! She cast herself upon the grass, where no eye could see, and sobbed aloud in her storm of despair.

She heeded not how long she lay. When she got up, the sun had set; it was dusk; and she staggered as one in drink, as she departed. In passing the rectory, a sudden idea occurred to her, and she went in. Scarcely in a fit state for it; but there might be no time to lose. Mr. Coomes was drinking his tea by firelight.

"Why, my dear," he said, "is it you?"

She sat down with her back to the fire, not caring that even his dim eyes should see her face in the faint light. And then she told him what she had called for—to beg him to take her brother as curate.

"My dear, it is true that Mr. Archer is going to leave me; but who told you of it?"

"He told me so himself."

"He is a changeable fellow, then. He said he did not wish it immediately known; not to anyone; and requested me to keep it

secret. I have been thinking of your brother."

"Oh, Mr. Coomes," she urged, "you know it was through me he was driven away from here, to give place to Mr. Archer. Since his illness that thought has rested like a weight on my conscience. He has been ill again this winter; the bleak air there tries him. If you would only receive him as curate now?"

"We will see about it," answered Mr. Coomes. And Hester rose to go.

"Hester," he whispered, in a kindly voice, as he followed her to the door, "how is it between you and George Archer? Serene?"

"That is over," she said, striving to speak indifferently. "We have bidden each other adieu for ever."

"If I did not think this! He is losing himself like an idiot. God's peace be with you, my child."

The Reverend Mr. Archer went up to town with the Seaford family; and Mr. Halliwell, whose year of curacy was out in Wales, took priest's orders, and became curate of Seaford. Monotonously enough for Hester the time passed until August, when the Seafords returned to the castle; but Mr. Archer was not with them, neither was the Lady Georgina. It had all come out to the Earl. Hester, who had heard nothing and knew nothing, was at the window when the carriages drove by; watching for them, if the truth must be told. The two carriages passed very quickly, and she did not recognise a single face, save little Ellen's, who was sitting forward. She looked for Lady Georgina's, and she looked for *his*, but she saw neither. Near the park-gates, that same evening, she met the child and the governess. Hester entered, and sat down with the latter on one of the benches,

and the little girl ran about in glee ; it was pleasant for her, after the confinement of London. Hester's throat was twitching wildly ; but she would not ask after him. She did, however, inquire, in a roundabout way, of Lady Georgina, hoping that might lead to his name.

" De Lady Georgina ? Oh, she is well enough !" answered Mademoiselle Berri. " You know dat she did marry yesterday."

" Marry !" echoed Hester, her heart standing still.

" It was de quietest wedding possible, because Madame la Comtesse is so ill. De Lady Georgina, she is all for de show, and she was not pleased ; but de Earl would not hear of having de world. Dey had but ten people at de breakfast besides de family."

" Are they—is Lady Georgina come back with you ?" gasped Hester in her terrible suspense.

"Come back wid us! Ma foi! She did go away wid her husband after de breakfast. Dat is anoder of your barbarous English customs. Wid us, when a young girl marries, she does stay in her own house wid her mother for some days, but you send de poor young thing all away by herself.—Lady El-lène, you will have de face like one chou rouge if you do jump like dat."

Hester could bear it no longer. "Who has Lady Georgina married?" she asked in a low tone, turning her face away as if watching the movements of the little girl.

"My dear, who should she marry but de Honourable Caudour? He was fiancé'd to her dis long time—I do not know your word for it. He does dote upon her, and thinks her de vraie ange. Dey are gone to Lord Caudour's château at Riche-monde, and den dey are going on to de Continent. Ah ciel! if I was but going too! Dis England will kill

me. I have de vrai mal du pays at my heart. Mi Lady El-lène, donc! reste plus tranquille."

Sunshine stole over Hester. She nerved herself to speak in a careless tone; with her face still turned to the child. "Has Mr. Archer come back with the young Seafords?"

"What, de young minister? Not he. He will never enter de doors of dat family more, and we have anoder tutor. My dear, don't you know dat de Earl turned him out?"

"No," uttered Hester.

"It was—let me see—I tink in June; I know de shivers of de dreadful English spring had passed. The Vicomte, young Sale, heard a great chatter, like a dis-pute, between his sister and de minister, and he looked into de room and heard him say dat he would forgive her for saying what she did, and she was laughing den, and he had got her hands and was kissing and clasping dem like one great

donkey as he was, poor fellow, for he might have seen dat she was but amusing herself wid him. So Lord Sale—I do think he did it for mischief, for de Earl had come in den, and Mr. Archer had gone out—asked his sister when de wedding was to be, and why she did not write to Mr. Caudour to tell him she had jilted him for de parson. Wid dat de Earl rose up his ears and asked what was meant. I do not know what Lord Sale said, but de Lady Georgina she was in de furious rage wid him for days after. De Earl went into de library and sent a servant for Mr. Archer to go to him dere.”

“ Did he go ?” cried Hester breathlessly.

“ My dear, how could he help himself? And when he got dere he showed himself de double donkey, for he did avow to de Earl dat he *loved* de Lady Georgina—dat he loved her better dan life.”

“ And the Earl—what did he say ?”

"What would he be likely to say in such a case?" returned the governess "Dey are all full of sang froid, all de English nobles. He just poohed him down wid contempt, and said his services were not required in de house after dat hour, and paid him his money, and wished him good morning, all cool and civil. Dat's what de Earl did."

"So he left!"

"He saw de Lady Georgina before it, though. And she treated him as civilly as de Earl had done, and said she was very sorry, but it was no fault of hers, and dat he should not so have mistaken her. He said dat his heart was breaking for her—could she not see dat it was? She replied dat she should always retain a pleasant memory of his flattering sentiments towards her, but she could not say any more. Oh, my dear, she was a vain girl; she did think men were but made to make homage to her. She went all

gay to a soirée at the Duchess of Gloucester's dat same evening, widout one care for de killed heart of dat poor young clergyman. Child, you are looking pale ; it is dis heat ; you should untie your bonnet-strings."

"I feel the heat very much," murmured Hester.

"Oh, but talk of pale faces, you should have seen his when he left de Earl's," added mademoiselle. "I was coming in from a walk wid de little girl and met him in de hall. He held out his hand to me to say good-bye, and I looked up at his wan face—it was one tableau of miserie. 'Where are you going to, dat you say farewell ?' I asked, for I did not yet know what had happened dat morning. 'I know not where I am going,' he replied ; 'away from here.' And while I was in de surprise he was gone."

"Where did he go ?" asked Hester.

"My dear, who's to know ? If you ask my

opinion, I should say dat he just went to de nearest river, or to an empty room and a charcoal fire. I know if my face betrayed what his did, I should not be anxious to live. I did pity him wid all my heart. And he was so handsome, so much de scholar and de gentleman."

"Was he never heard of again at the Earl's?" resumed Hester in a low voice.

"Never. He was not likely to be. Are you going, my dear?"

"Mamma will be waiting tea for me," said Hester. "I shall see you another day."

She walked away with her bruised heart. All through that spring and summer she had unconsciously cherished a hope of the period when he should return to the castle. As she reached home Lucy met her.

"Hester," she whispered, "we have been hearing some news from Mrs. Stannard.

George Archer has made such a fool of himself."

" Ah !"

" Made an offer to the Earl for Lady Georgina, or something of that sort : Mrs. Stannard never came quite at particulars, she says. And the Earl turned him out of the house that same day."

" Mademoiselle Berri said he had left," returned Hester, knowing she must answer something. " I have just seen her in the park."

" I fear you have long been grieving after him," went on Lucy, " though you persist in being so silent over it. Your coolness with each other, and the breaking off of the engagement, which you never satisfactorily explained, are accounted for now. What an idiot he must be, to have dared to think seriously of Georgina Seaford ! I am sure this news must cure you. Never give a thought to him again, Hester ; he is not worth it."

"I do not think of him," answered Hester, almost fretfully. She could not bear that even Lucy should suspect her misery.

"What a good thing it is, Hester, as things have turned out, that your engagement was not made public, especially at the castle. Lady Georgina and Mr. Caudour were married yesterday."

"Mademoiselle said so. What did Mrs. Stannard call here for? To impart this news about Mr. Archer?"

"She came with a message from the Countess: that little Ellen Seaford would be ready for you whichever day you would like to begin."

"I will not go to the castle again," said Hester quietly; "that is over."

"Hester," said her mother to her, as she kissed her forehead when they parted for the night, "you can think over resuming your duties with Ellen Seaford. My opinion,

my dear child, is that it will be pleasant to yourself to do so, rather than the contrary, as it will serve to occupy your mind. But if you still say it cannot be, perhaps we can substitute Lucy."

Mrs. Halliwell said no more, only kissed her again, more affectionately than usual, but Hester understood. She lay awake all that night, battling with her unhappiness. Towards morning she began to ask herself whether it was not *her duty* to go again to the castle, rather than idly to resign herself to sorrow. It is true she disliked to mingle with them again : to be in the scenes that reminded her so powerfully of *him*. Her mother had said that Lucy might possibly be her substitute ; but Lucy's education had been of a higher order than her own, for she had shown much aptitude for all polite accomplishments, and Hester knew that not very patiently would Lucy sit down to teach the rudiments of

English to a child. The salary received from Lady Seaford was a consideration to them, for her brother, what with his illness and the pitiful stipend of his first year, had been obliged to encroach considerably on their means. Mary's education was also now expensive. They had tried the plan of Lucy teaching her, but it did not answer ; both were impatient : a sister can rarely exert the necessary authority over a sister. Added to these reflections, Hester felt that the occupation would really serve to divert her mind.

So she resumed her visits to the castle. Mr. Archer's name was never mentioned there by anyone. Mademoiselle Berri seemed to have exhausted her stock of information that first afternoon, and did not again recur to the subject ; Hester steadily went through her duties at home and abroad, and thus got over the days as she best could : but at night she would turn about upon her sleepless bed

and moan, "Oh that he would come! that he would come back to be forgiven!"

And the days, and the weeks, and the years went on, and they never heard of him, and he never came.





CHAPTER VI.

THE INFIRMARY PUPIL.

THE Reverend Mr. Elliot and his wife were seated one day in their home, a rural parsonage in one of the Midland counties, discussing plans and prospects for their numerous family. Mr. Elliot was the uncle of George Archer, who was his sister's child; but that has nothing, just now, to do with the story.

Though Mr. Elliot's living was a good one, he had much difficulty in making both ends meet, for his family were growing up, and his sons were expensive. The present discussion concerned Thomas, the eldest son.

He had served an apprenticeship to the medical profession, and a plan was in agitation to place him for improvement under Mr. Dicks, an eminent surgeon attached to the infirmary at Nearford, the county town.

Perhaps what had first given rise to the idea of placing him at Nearford was the fact that Mrs. Elliot had an aunt living there, who, they hoped, would give Tom a home for the period, which would be an economy : in Mr. Tom Elliot's case, a very great economy, for he was of the fraternity denominated "fast." Let it come from where it would, from somewhere or from nowhere, Tom must spend.

Mrs. Agatha Needham, a maiden lady, had lived in Nearford all her life, which was by no means a definite number of years, her own register saying forty-nine, and that of the church sixty-three. She possessed a very pretty property, had never shown her-

self backward in kindness and hospitality to her relations, and Mrs. Elliot had been encouraged to make the application as to Tom, intimating, what was really the truth, that should her aunt Agatha refuse her bold request they should be compelled to relinquish the placing Tom with Mr. Dicks, for the expense would be beyond their means. Mrs. Agatha's reply had arrived, and Mr. and Mrs. Elliot were discussing it.

She was very willing to receive Thomas, she wrote, provided he would undertake to observe certain conditions: that he would never smoke, would never speak to her two maid-servants, except in her presence, and would always be in bed by half after ten, unless he was out with herself at a whist-party. Let him promise this, and she would keep him, pay his laundress expenses, and allow him half-a-crown a week pocket-money till his studies were over.

Mr. Thomas Elliot was called into the presence of his parents, promised obedience to the rules, and vowed they were just what he should have laid down for himself. Whether Mr. Elliot quite believed him is doubtful, from the urgent cautions he pressed upon him not to offend Mrs. Agatha. When Tom was released he went into explosions of laughter, especially touching the half-crown a week. He arrived at Nearford, a dashing young man of twenty-one, showy in dress, free in manner, but the pink of quiet propriety in the presence of Mrs. Agatha ; he speedily became popular in Nearford, and Mrs. Agatha grew intensely proud of him.

“ My dear Thomas,” she exclaimed to him one morning at breakfast, “ what an extraordinary smell of tobacco - smoke pervades the house when you are in it ! ”

“ It does, ma’am ; it’s highly disagreeable. Nearly makes me sick, sometimes.”

"But what can it proceed from?" pursued Mrs. Agatha, sniffing very much over her muffin. "You assure me you do not smoke; you promised solemnly, you know."

"I smoke!" echoed Mr. Tom; "I touch a filthy cigar! It comes from my clothes."

"How does it get into them?" wondered Mrs. Agatha.

"They are such a set, aunt, at that infirmary—have cigars in their mouths from morning till night. Sometimes I can't see across our dissecting-room for the smoke. Of course, my clothes get impregnated with it."

"Dear me, Thomas, how sorry I am for you! But don't talk about dissecting-rooms, if you please. The smell must also get into your eyes, and hair, and whiskers!"

"So it does, uncommon strong. But I douse my head in the big basin every morning, and that takes it off."

"The governors of the infirmary ought to

be reported to the Lord-Lieutenant," cried Mrs. Agatha warmly. "I never heard of anything so shameful. How can they think of permitting the patients to smoke?"

"It's not the patients, aunt," returned Mr. Tom, smothering a grin. "What should bring them in the dissecting-room: unless—ahem!—they are carried there?"

"Then is it the doctors?"

"No; it's the pupils."

"Misguided youths," ejaculated Mrs. Agatha. "And you, a clergyman's son, have to associate with them! Never you learn smoking, my dear Thomas. But about this smell: I really do not know what is to be done. The maids commence coughing whenever they enter your bedroom, for the fumes of smoke there, they tell me, are overpowering."

"Ah, I know they are. It's where all my clothes hang."

“Suppose you were to get some lumps of camphor and sew in your pockets?” suggested Mrs. Agatha, alighting on a bright idea. “If it keeps fevers from the frame, it may keep tobacco-smoke from clothes. Get sixpenny-worth, Thomas.”

“I’ll get a shilling’s worth,” said Tom. “Though I fear its properties don’t reach smoke.”

“Oh, Thomas, I forgot. Did you hear the noise in the house last night?”

“Noise?” responded Mr. Tom.

“A noise on the stairs, like somebody bumping up them. It was just two o’clock, for I heard the clock strike. When Rachel came to dress me this morning, she said it must have been Minny, racing after the mice. But I never heard her make such a noise before. I hope it did not disturb you.”

“Not at all, aunt,” answered Tom, burying his face in his handkerchief: “I never woke

till half an hour ago. Cats do make an awful noise sometimes. I'm off to the infirmary."

"And you have eaten no breakfast! I can't think what the lad lives upon."

In the hall, as Mr. Thomas was dashing across it, he encountered the housemaid; a pretty girl with cherry cheeks.

"Look here, sir," she said. "See what we picked up this morning. If mistress had found it, instead of me and cook, whatever would you have done?"

"My latch-key! I must have dropped it when I came in, in the night. But after a punch jollification, following on a tripe supper, one's perceptive faculties are apt to be obscured. That's a fact undisputed in physics, Rachel, my dear." And as Tom dropped the latch-key into his pocket, he acknowledged his obligation to the finder in a way of his own.

"Now, Mr. Thomas," remonstrated Rachel, "I have threatened fifty times that I'd tell missis of you, and now I will. You want to get me out of my place, sir, going on in this way."

"Do!" cried Tom. "Go and tell her at once. And harkee, my dear, if you and cook get talking to the old lady about the smoke in my bedroom, I'll shoot the first of you I come near. You should put the windows and door open."

Just as the incorrigible Tom walked off, Mrs. Agatha Needham opened the breakfast-room door, and down dropped the maid upon her hands and knees, and began rubbing away at the oilcloth.

"Rachel! was that my nephew talking to you?"

"Mr. Thomas has gone out, ma'am."

"Yes. Who was he talking to before he went?"

"Talking to, ma'am? Oh, I remember; he asked about his umbrella. I think he must have left it at the infirmary, or at Mr. Dicks's."

"Asking a necessary question I will look over," said Mrs. Agatha; "but should he ever show a disposition to speak with you upon indifferent subjects, you will come straight off to me and report him, Rachel; for it is not allowed."

"Very well, ma'am."

From the above specimen of Mr. Tom Elliot, it may be wondered how he contrived to remain an inmate of Mrs. Agatha Needham's and continue in that lady's good graces. It was a marvel to Tom himself, and he was wont to say in that favourite resort, the dissecting-room, that though he had got on the ancient maiden's blind side, he had more trouble than enough to keep himself there.

One day sundry of the infirmary pupils were assembled in the above-mentioned choice retreat. The relics lying about were not very pleasant to look upon for an uninitiated eye, but it seemed that the young gentlemen engaged in the cheering business of studying these lopped branches did not find their occupation particularly disagreeable. A looker-on might have described them as being rather "jolly." There were seven of them : four had short pipes in their mouths, and the three others cigars, and they were smoking away with all their might, Mr. Tom Elliot being amongst them, and some pewter pots of beer, which stood on the table in close contact with the—relics.

"How did old Moss come out last night?" inquired one, with a shock head of very red hair, as he sat on a deal side-table, and kicked his feet against a neighbouring wall ; "Old Moss" being a botanist, who was then giving

lectures in the city, which the infirmary pupils were expected to attend.

"What's the good of asking me?" responded Tom Elliot. "Pass the pot, Jones."

"I'd a better engagement, and didn't show," resumed the first speaker. "Were you not there either, Elliot?"

"I just was there. And got jammed close to two of the loveliest girls I ever saw in my life. One of 'em is a prize. You are beginning that arm wrong, Davis."

"Teach your grandmother," returned Mr. Davis. "I was practising on arms when you were in your leading-strings."

"Elliot needn't talk. He'll never be any good; hasn't the knack of holding the knife."

"It's because I don't practise. I asked old What's-his-name, the sexton of St. Luke's, how much he'd charge for a subject."

"How much did he say, Elliot? That

fellow does more business than all the sextons of Nearford put together."

"Because he is favoured by accidental circumstances," interrupted Davis, who was somewhat older than the rest of the pupils, and (though it is not of the slightest consequence to mention it, as it has nothing to do with the story) was a son of Mr. Davis, of Seaford. "St. Luke's is a populous parish. I have seen on a Sunday as many as six funerals there; and the churchyard is snug and quiet, free from overlookers on a moonlight night. What did he ask you, Elliot? He'd clap it on to you, being a fresh one."

"No; I told him I was here. A young one, from one guinea to three; a full-grown, from seven to ten."

"Did you strike a bargain? Who's that at my sandwiches? Hand 'em over here."

"No, I didn't," said Elliot. "The fact is,

I don't know how on earth to get it smuggled in, or where to hide it when it is in. If the old lady, or those two female slaveys came upon it in my bedroom some odd day—whew! they'd screech out blue murder. I should lose my quarters, too."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Elliot, if you like," cried a very young student eagerly—Mr. Dobbs. "I'll go halves with you for a three-guinea one, and we can put it at my place, and you can come there and exercise. My landlady won't care, if I give her a pint of gin at the bringing in."

"I'll see about it," answered Elliot.
"Give us the pewter again."

"How Elliot dips into the beer to-day !
One has no chance, drinking with him."

"Send for some more," was that gentleman's rejoinder. "This is dry work."

"Much work you are doing!"

"Well, you are at it, Jones, so don't growl.

I am more agreeably occupied ; recalling those lovely visions of last night."

"I say," cried Davis, "who were those girls Elliot's raving about?"

"Who's to know ? There were fifty girls in the room. Very likely they were the Thompsons."

"Annihilate the Thompsons!" interrupted Elliot. "The one's cross-eyed and the other's sickly. D'ye think I don't know the Thompson girls? These were strangers. At least, I have never seen their faces at lectures before."

"Whereabouts did your two beauties sit?"

"About half-way up the room, on the left-hand side," responded Tom. "Close underneath the astronomical map."

"I know," shouted Dobbs. "They had a big fat duenna between them, hadn't they?"

"Just so, little Dobbs. In a scarlet hat."

"A scarlet hat!" echoed Davis.

"Or a turban," added Elliot: "might be meant for one or the other. A glaring red cone, three feet high."

"Over a flaxen wig, which she puts in papers, and makes believe it's her own hair," rejoined little Dobbs. "It's their aunt."

"You insignificant monkey—*their* aunt!" broke forth Elliot. "If you don't tell the name without delay, I'll dissect you. You see I'm expiring under the suspense."

"I don't think much of the girls, myself," persisted the young gentleman, delighted to exercise Elliot's patience. "The dark-eyed one is the best, and that's Clara."

"Out of the way, Jones—let me get at him. I'll Clara him, as he——"

"Hallo, Elliot, don't take the arm with you!" interrupted Davis. "Dobbs, you young limb, if you cause this confusion again I'll turn you out. Keep still, Elliot, and I'll tell

you. They were his cousins, the Blake girls, Clara and Georgy."

"That they were not," said Mr. Dobbs.
"They were the two Freers."

"Oh, the Freers!" echoed Davis; "they don't often show. Old Bagwig keeps them up tight. They are the prettiest girls in Nearford."

"Who's old Bagwig?" demanded Elliot.

"The Papa Freer. As cute a lawyer as any on the bench. He sports a wig with a bag behind; the only relic of bygone days to be seen in the town."

"I intend to monopolize one of those girls for myself," announced Elliot.

"Phew! wish you joy of your chance. Bagwig's laying by sacks of gold, and designs those two female inheritors of it to marry on the top of the ladder. Nothing under a foreign prince. You'd never get admitted inside their house, if you tried for a year."

"I tell you that girl's a prize, and shall be mine: and I'll bet you two crowns to one that I'm inside their house within a week. Tell me I can't get in where I choose! You can't, perhaps," added the audacious Elliot, drawing up his handsome figure in his vanity.

"Done!" cried Jones.

"And I'll take him too," echoed Davis.
"Which of the two is the prize?"

"There's one with piercing dark eyes, giving out wicked glances," answered Elliot.
"And splendid dark hair."

"Yes, that's Clara."

"And a Roman sort of nose, and rosy pink colour."

"That *is* Clara."

"Tall, fine shape, lovely fall in her shoulders," went on Elliot.

"Yes, yes, no mistaking Clara."

"Well then, it's not she."

"Now, Elliot, don't try on any gammon."

It must be the young one then, and that's Loo."

"Loo, is it?" returned Tom Elliot. "The giantess in the scarlet top-knot, was that the Mamma Freer?"

"She's dead. Who was it, Dobbs?"

"Old Mother Stevens, the greatest guy in all the world. One day——"

"Hark! hush! Listen, will you!" interrupted Davis. "There's Dicks's voice, as I'm alive."

The metamorphosis was like magic. Certain overcoats of the pupils', which lay in a heap in a corner of the room, were raised, and the pewter pots hidden under them; slops of beer, rather prevalent, were rubbed dry with handkerchiefs; cigars and pipes, all alright as they were, were thrust into side-pockets; tables, as sitting-places, were abandoned, and when Mr. Dicks, M.R.C.S., entered, every student presented

the appearance of sober industry, some busy with the operating knives, some buried deep in surgical books of reference.

If fortune ever favoured any venturesome layer of bets, Tom Elliot was certainly the one that day. On his return home in the afternoon, he found Mrs. Agatha Needham cutting most extraordinary capers. She was evidently in a desperate state of excitement and anger. Tom's conscience took alarm. He believed something had come out about himself, and felt as if a cold bath had been dashed over him.

"Dear aunt, whatever is the matter?" he ventured to ask, finding she did not speak, and thinking silence might look like self-confession. "You are surely not taken with St. Vitus's dance in the legs?"

"Never was such a thing heard of! never was such a wicked act perpetrated! Rachel —my bonnet and velvet mantle. Thomas,

nephew, don't stand peering at my legs. It's not in them, it's in my mind."

Mr. Thomas sat down, completely cowed. What on earth had come to light? The latchkey, or kissing Rachel, or smoking in his bedroom at night? or had that sexton—

"By all that's awful, that must be it," reasoned Tom. "The bungling fool has mistaken me and sent the thing home; and she and the girls have turned Bluebeard's wife and opened the box." Tom's face began to stream down. Whatever could he do?

"Has a—a case—been brought here, ma'am: a heavy one?" he stammered. "I came home on purpose, because there has been a mistake. It belongs to Mr. Davis, senior student, and ought to have gone to his lodgings. I'll get a man, and have it moved directly."

"Mercy, boy!" cried Mrs. Agatha. "I don't know anything about cases. If they had brought a dozen here I should never have seen them to-day. There has been a wicked man here, Thomas; that's what there has been. A lawyer, I believe he calls himself, and— That's right, Rachel; I'll go and consult mine now."

Tom's spirits went up amazingly. "Then *I* have not offended you, dear aunt? I feared—I don't know what I didn't fear—that somebody might have been trying to traduce my character to you."

"Child and woman have I lived in this house for sixt—over forty years," went on Mrs. Agatha, unheeding Mr. Tom's fears; "my own leasehold property, and my father and mother's before me. And now an impious wretch comes forward and says there's a flaw in the lease, and I must turn out, and am responsible for back rent! I'll

go and consult the first lawyer in the town. Come along with me, Thomas."

"It's impossible, dear aunt. I have six hours' work before me to-day: reading up for Mr. Dicks." The truth was, he had made an appointment for billiards.

"That's exceedingly vexatious. I should like to have had you with me for a witness. But you are quite right, Thomas: never put your studies aside for anything. I'll wish you good-afternoon. Rachel, if anyone comes, you don't know when I shall be at home, for I am gone to Lawyer Freer's."

"Lawyer Freer's!" screamed Tom, rushing after his aunt and nearly upsetting Rachel. "Of course you must have a witness, aunt, if you are going there. My reading can wait. Just stop while I slip on another coat and waistcoat."

"What is the matter with those you have on?" demanded Mrs. Agatha.

"Oh—this is my professional suit. And, when I walk with you, I like to look as your nephew ought."

"Dutiful lad!" aspirated Mrs. Agatha. "He shall not be a loser by his attachment to me."

Lawyer Freer was at home, and ensconced Mrs. Agatha in his consulting-room. Her dutiful nephew slipped aside as they were going in, and shut the door on the old lady and the attorney. Mrs. Agatha Needham was too full of her subject to notice, at first, the absence of her nephew; and afterwards she would not disturb the consideration of her case by calling for him. They both concluded Mr. Tom was exercising his patience in company with the clerks in the front office.

Not he. He was as daring as he was high; and he went along the passage, peeping here and peeping there, till he

came to a room where two young ladies were seated—his beauties of the previous night. Clara, the eldest, a splendid girl; Louisa (the prize) prettier still, with dancing eyes and shining curls.

“I beg pardon,” cried Tom, as the young ladies rose in surprise, “do not let me disturb you. I am sent here to wait while my aunt holds a private consultation with Mr. Freer—Mrs. Agatha Needham.”

The young ladies bowed. They had a speaking acquaintance with Mrs. Agatha, and hoped she was well. Tom assured them she was very well, and went on talking upon other subjects, and made himself entirely at home. Mr. Tom Elliot had won his bet.



CHAPTER VII.

THE GREAT CAUSE, “NEWCOME *versus* NEEDHAM.”

MRS. AGATHA NEEDHAM found her lease and its flaw could not be settled by the lawyers. The cause, in due time, was entered for trial at the March Assizes, “Newcome *versus* Needham.” It caused a great sensation in Nearford : all the holders of leasehold property arguing that if Mrs. Agatha was disturbed in her long and peaceful occupancy, where was their security ? As to Mrs. Agatha, it may be questioned if she enjoyed a full night’s rest during the period of suspense. Nothing could exceed the sympathy and interest

evinced by Tom Elliot in the affair : as Mrs. Agatha observed, what she should have done without him she did not know. His legs were kept on the run between his aunt's house and Lawyer Freer's ; and the numerous messages forwarded by the old lady nearly drove the lawyer wild. *She* was fidgety, and Thomas pressed her on.

" Do you want my services with Mr. Freer this morning, aunt ? "

" No, Thomas, I think not this morning."

" You'd do well to send to him, if only the slightest message. No trouble to me. Those lawyers require perpetual looking up. They are so apt to forget the interests of one client in those of another. It's 'out of sight out of mind' with them."

" Very true, Thomas. Thank you. Go down then to Mr. Freer: my compliments, and I have sent to know if there's anything

fresh. But I am ashamed to give you this frequent trouble."

" Trouble's a pleasure, aunt, when you are concerned," replied Thomas.

"The comfort of possessing such a nephew!" ejaculated Mrs. Agatha.

Tom flew off, but the stars were against him that day. Lawyer Freer was out ; so much the better : for Tom could more safely find his way to the young ladies, as he had now done many and many a time. They had also taken to look for him, and they saw him coming down the street.

"Here's Mr. Elliot, Loo," observed Clara ; and a blush of satisfaction rose to her face, and she turned from the window to a mirror and smoothed her hair here and there with her finger. Louisa did not answer, but a much brighter blush rose to *her* face, and she bent lower over the piece of drawing she was preparing for her master. For Louisa, scarcely

eighteen, still had masters attending her, and Clara, who was two years older, looked upon her as a child. Child as she might be, though, she had grown to *love* Tom Elliot.

Why did they both blush, someone may ask ; surely they were not both in love with him ? Not exactly. Tom Elliot was a general admirer, and whilst he had become really attached to Louisa Freer, and had striven privately to gain her affections, he had evinced a very fair share of admiration for Clara, partly in homage to her beauty, partly to divert suspicion from her sister. And Clara Freer, who had no objection in the world to receiving admiration from so handsome and popular a man as Tom Elliot, certainly did not repel him.

“ He is over head and ears in love,” Clara was proceeding to add ; but her sister interrupted her in a startling voice.

“ In love ! With whom ?”

"With me," complacently replied Miss Freer; "who else is there? His next move will be to make me an offer—in his random way."

Louisa's heart beat fast against her side, and her blood tingled to her fingers' ends. "Make *you* an offer!" she gasped forth. "Would you marry him?"

"Bless the child! I marry a medical student, an embryo surgeon! I look a little higher than that, Loo. But if Tom Elliot were as rich in wealth as he is in attractions—why then you might stand a speedy chance of being a bridesmaid. I know he adores me."

No more was said, for Tom entered and began rattling away after his own fashion. An attractive companion he undoubtedly was. Presently Miss Freer was called from the room by a servant, upon some domestic affair.

"My dearest Loo," he whispered, as soon as they were alone, "you look sad this morning. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered, bursting into tears. And Tom, all alive with surprise and concern, clasped her in his arms, and was in the very agreeable act of kissing off her tears, when Clara returned. It was sooner than they had expected her, and they were fairly caught.

Clara, her features naturally of a haughty cast, could put on *a look* when she liked. Mr. Elliot had never yet been favoured with it; but it shone out in full force as she demanded an explanation from both of them.

"The truth is, Miss Freer," said Tom, speaking up like a man, "that I love your sister. Until I saw her, all young ladies were alike to me—that is, I was fond of them all. But now she is the only one I care for, or ever shall care for in the world. I did not

intend this to come out yet, and I hope you will keep our secret."

"And pray," returned Clara, boiling over with rage and mortification, "when *did* you intend it to come out, sir?"

"When? Not till I was well established in my profession, and could ask for her as I ought to do, of Mr. Freer."

"Clara," uttered the younger sister, her tears falling fast in agitation, for she had read the expression in the elder's eye, "for the love of Heaven do not betray me to papa. Dear Clara!"

"I shall acquaint your father instantly, as is my duty," was the cold reply. "We shall have a baby in leading-strings entangling itself in a matrimonial engagement next."

"Clara, my dear sister—let me call you so for the first, though I hope not for the last time—be reasonable, be kind," said Mr. Elliot, trying *his* powers of persuasion.

But, effectual as they had hitherto proved with the young lady, they failed now.

"What I can do to oppose your views concerning my sister, I will do," she vehemently answered. "You have played a traitor's part, Mr. Elliot, in seeking her affections. I beg you to leave the house at once, and you will never be admitted to it again."

"But, Clara," he remonstrated, "you——"

"I have told you to leave the house," she reiterated, pale with anger. "If you do not quit it this instant, I shall ring for the servants to show you out."

"Very well, Miss Freer," he said, all his customary equanimity returning to him. "Louisa, my darling," he impressively added, turning to her for a last farewell, "we may be obliged to bend to circumstances and temporarily separate; but remember—come what may, I will be true to you. Be you so to me. Will you promise?"

"I will," she whispered; and Mr. Tom Elliot bent down and sealed it on her lips, regardless of Miss Clara's energetic appeal to the bell.

Clara Freer made her own tale good to her father, and Thomas made his good to Mrs. Agatha. For, in the violent indignation of the attorney, he had informed that lady of her nephew's having presumed to make love to his daughter, and Mrs. Agatha, overwhelmed with the first shock of the news, wrote off an imperative summons to Tom's father, telling him to post to Nearford upon a matter of life and death, which summons brought the alarmed parent flying at express speed.

Everyone who heard of the affair pronounced them a couple of simpletons. A medical pupil, of twenty-one, without any definite hopes or money whatever, to have talked of marriage, was ridiculous; and for

a young lady, *with* money and prospects, to have listened to him, was more ridiculous still. The clergyman, when he arrived and found what the matter was, wished to treat it as a joke; the lawyer was too outraged to treat it in any way but in earnest; while Tom strove to deny it to Mrs. Agatha.

"There's nothing in it, dear aunt," he pleaded. "Don't you believe any of them."

"But Miss Freer affirms that she caught you kissing her sister," persisted Mrs. Agatha. "How do you account for that?"

"I'm sure I don't know how it is to be accounted for," answered Tom demurely. "I believe I must have dropped asleep with my eyes open, and done it in a dream. I was sitting there, waiting for the lawyer to come in, and had got tired to death."

Mrs. Agatha was staggered. She had not much faith in that sort of dream, but she had great faith in Tom's word.

"Kissing is very bad, Thomas," she observed doubtfully.

"It's shocking," promptly answered Thomas. "You cannot believe, ma'am, I should be guilty of it—awake. Never tried to kiss any young lady in my life, except my sisters; never wanted to."

Not, however, to his father and Mr. Freer did Thomas Elliot make a similar defence. To them he told the truth boldly—that he was in love with the young lady, and meant to marry her if she would wait for him.

His impudence struck Lawyer Freer speechless. "Sir," he stuttered to the parson, when his tongue came to him, "I insist upon it that you find means to stop this presumption of your son's. You are a clergyman, sir, and must feel that it is a disgrace to him, to my family, and to the age we live in."

"I'll talk to him," responded Mr. Elliot meekly. "I am sure he will hear reason."

So he took his graceless son all alone into the bedroom of the hotel where he had put up, and did "talk" to him. But Tom remained as hard as a flint, protesting that no father had a right to control his son in the choice of a wife.

"You will find he has," angrily repeated Mr. Elliot, provoked to warmth. "I forbid you—do you hear me?—I *forbid* you to think any more of this."

"I shall be sure to marry her in the end—if it's twenty years to come," persisted Tom. "I have told her so."

"At your peril," uttered Mr. Elliot; "at the peril of disobedience. And deliberate disobedience to a father never goes unpunished, remember."

"I'll risk the punishment if ever I get the luck," dutifully concluded Mr. Tom to himself.

The Reverend Mr. Elliot returned to his home, and matters went on quietly for a week or two, Tom finding no opportunity of seeing Louisa, except on Sundays, when he went to St. Luke's, which was Mr. Freer's parish church, and enshrined himself in a pew within view of the lawyer's, always telling Mrs. Agatha, who expected him to go to church with her, that there was an unusual press of in-door patients at the infirmary.

Meanwhile the affair was talked of abroad, and a country squire, who was intimate with the attorney's family and very much admired Louisa, came forward when he heard of it and made her an offer, fearing he might lose her. All the blame, be it observed, was laid by everyone upon Tom Elliot; Louisa got none. The proposal was complacently received by Lawyer Freer, for it was a first-rate match for his daughter. He, like others, had not cast much reproach upon

Louisa, his indignation being concentrated on the audacious infirmary pupil; and now that the intimacy between the two was broken off, the lawyer concluded the affair was at an end, and so dismissed it from his mind.

"If I could have chosen from all the county for you, Louisa, I should have fixed on Turnbull," observed the lawyer to his daughters. "What do you say, Clara?"

Clara said nothing: she was sulky and cross. She considered herself much handsomer than that chit Louisa, yet all the offers were going to her.

"His rent-roll is two thousand a-year, all clear and unencumbered," continued Mr. Freer. "I had the settlement of affairs, last year, at his father's death. You are a lucky child."

"I should not like to live in the country," timidly remarked Louisa, not daring to make any more formidable objection.

"Not like—what! raise an objection to Turnbull Park? There's not a prettier spot, for its size, in the county!" cried the attorney.
"I wish *I* had the chance of living there."

"If Mr. Thomas Elliot were its owner, we might hear less of objection to 'living in the country,'" very spitefully exclaimed Miss Freer.

"Thomas Elliot!" repeated the lawyer; "hang Thomas Elliot!" He looked inquiringly from one to the other: Clara's face was pale and severe; Louisa's burning. "Hark ye, young ladies," he said, "we will dispense with naming that person in future. Had Louisa not given him up, I would have discarded her in disgrace. I would, on my solemn word. Squire Turnbull dines here to-morrow, Clara. Let the dinner be handsome."

Once more were the pupils assembled in a private department of the infirmary. Not

the dissecting-room, this time, but in the mortuary ; and they were looking at—well, no matter what : something which had been in one of the wards the previous evening. Their pots of beer were absent, but their careless jokes were not.

“Elliot’s late this morning,” observed Jones. “Won’t we have a shy at him when he comes !”

“ I wonder if he knows it ?”

“ Not yet,” answered little Dobbs. “ I’ll bet a shilling to a crown he doesn’t. It was only through my aunt Blake drinking tea last night with Guy Stevens and her turban that it came out.”

“ Which is gone ?” interrupted Elliot, coming in with a cigar between his lips, and bustling forward to look at what was before them. “ Oh, it’s that one ! Well, we shall know now what was really the matter with him. Poor fellow ! he was a fine chap.”

"I say, there's a chance of getting him."

"Is there?" returned Elliot. "What are the mother and cousins?"

"It is believed he has none. None have turned up, as yet."

"Which will be prime," added little Dobbs.
"Heard the news, Elliot?"

"I heard no news."

"About a friend of yours," Davis interposed; "going to be married."

Mr. Elliot puffed on apathetically, and made no reply.

"I say, Elliot," began Jones again, "do you know Turnbull?"

"I don't know any Turnbull," responded Tom, who, as little Dobbs phrased it, seemed "cranky" that morning.

"Turnbull of Turnbull Park. Drives iron-gray horses in his drag."

"Oh, that lot! A short, stout cove; looks

a candidate for apoplexy. Splendid cattle they are."

"He's going into the matrimonial noose, Elliot."

"He may go into another noose if he likes. Who called him a friend of mine?"

"No, the lady's your friend. A clipper she is, too."

"Only Elliot does not think so. Oh no, not at all!" cried Mr. Dobbs.

"Come, Elliot," Davis said, "guess who Turnbull's going to marry."

"You, perhaps," was the sulky answer.

"I'll bet he *has* heard it," grinned Davis; "he's so savage. It's your prize, little Loo Freer."

"What?" shrieked Elliot.

"Squire Turnbull marries Louisa Freer. Settlements are being drawn up, and wedding-dresses made."

"A lie!" shouted Elliot.

"It's not," interrupted Jones; "it's true. Dobbs' family have had the official announcement, and——"

They were interrupted by a low, peculiar whistle from Davis. It was understood. The surgeons were coming downstairs, and the pupils lapsed into silence and good behaviour.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE REVEREND SIMON WHISTLER.

Now it is not possible to defend Tom Elliot or Louisa Freer. Cast all the reproach you please at them, reader, for they well deserved it. They took alarm at the advances of Squire Turnbull, and planned a runaway marriage : though how they contrived to meet and consult was a matter of wonder afterwards to Nearford. It probably appeared to both as the only certain way of extricating Louisa ; but a more lamentably imprudent step was never taken.

Prudence, however, was no concern of Tom

Elliot's ; all he cared for was to get it accomplished, and he went to work in a daring and unusual way. He determined to marry her in her own parish church, and he ran up to London by the night mail, procured a license, and brought a confidential friend down with him, who entered with gusto into the secret and enjoyed the fun.

The incumbent of St. Luke's, the Reverend Simon Whistler, a bachelor, and still a young man, was not altogether fitted for a parson. Such as he were not uncommon, though, in those days. He was given to following the hounds more than to following his parishioners, was fond of gentlemen's after-dinner society, but painfully awkward and nervous in the presence of ladies. Good-natured, unsuspecting, he was the very man to be imposed upon by Tom Elliot.

Nearford Assizes came on. And late on the evening of the first day, Monday, a

confidential note from Lawyer Freer was delivered to the Reverend Simon Whistler, calling upon him to perform the marriage ceremony between his youngest daughter and Mr. Thomas Elliot the following morning at ten. Mr. Freer added a request that the matter might be kept strictly private, for reasons of which he would himself inform him when they met the following day. Now if the Reverend Simon had an objection to perform one part of his clerical duty, it was that of tying the nuptial knot. Baptisms he did not mind, burials he was quite at home in, but a gay wedding was his aversion, for the ladies and their fine clothes scared all his nerves and set them shaking. So he groaned aloud when he read the lawyer's letter, but was forced to resign himself to what there was no help for.

On Tuesday morning, at twenty-five minutes past nine precisely, Lawyer Freer

bustled into the town-hall, in the wake of two counsellors specially retained for Mrs. Agatha Needham. That lady herself, escorted by her nephew, and accompanied by several maiden friends, also arrived, just as the learned Baron who presided at *Nisi Prius* took his seat. With difficulty places were found for Mrs. Needham's party, for the Court was crammed, all the town being anxious to hear the great cause tried.

"And now, aunt, as you are comfortably fixed, I'll be off to the infirmary for an hour. It's my day to go round the wards with the surgeons."

"Why, Thomas," uttered the startled Mrs. Agatha, "you'll never think of leaving us unprotected! Mr. Dicks will excuse you on so important an occasion as this. Those gentlemen in wigs are staring here very unpleasantly already. How extremely ugly they are!"

"Staring, are they?" cried Tom. "I'll go and stop that. Just one moment, aunt; you'll take no harm. Back in a brace of shakes."

At ten o'clock the Reverend Mr. Whistler was in St. Luke's vestry, putting on his surplice. He had not to wait long for the wedding-party. It consisted only of Mr. Elliot, Louisa Freer (in her every-day things and a thick black veil), and a strange gentleman as groomsman.

"This is sadly unfortunate, Mr. Whistler," began Tom, in his off-hand manner; "my aunt's cause is on, and everybody's at it. Mrs. Agatha is in Court, Miss Freer and other witnesses. Mr. Freer never would have fixed the wedding for to-day had he thought the cause would come on before to-morrow. Of course he is obliged to be there, and excessively annoyed he is. He charged me with his compliments to you, and trusted

his absence would make no essential difference."

A fair speech, and the parson bowed, inwardly blessing the great cause, "*Newcome v. Needham.*" He had anticipated a string of ladies as long as the aisle, and a proportionate show of fans and feathers. He never performed the marriage service so glibly in his life—and he thought he had never seen a bride tremble more violently.

The fees were paid, the register signed, and the parties left the church. At the entrance, which was situated, like the church, in a low, obscure neighbourhood, stood a post-chaise and four. Mr. Tom Elliot, clearing a way through the collection of young nurses and infants there assembled, placed his bride in it, followed her in, banged-to the door, and off dashed the post-boys at a gallop.

"Never accomplished a feat more cleverly in my life," chuckled Tom. "Loo, my

darling, all the fathers in Christendom shan't separate us now."

The groomsman, meanwhile, after watching the chaise fairly away, returned to the vestry, and addressed the clergyman :

" Mr. Freer's compliments, sir, and he begs you will be at his house at seven to-night to celebrate the wedding."

Mr. Whistler replied in the affirmative, though not without hesitation. He had a horror of evening parties, and concluded this was nothing less than a dance. But he did not like to refuse on such an occasion, lest he should give offence ; and Lawyer Freer's Easter offering was always a plumper.

It was seven that evening when Mr. Freer returned home, having snatched a hasty dinner off a pocket sandwich in the town-hall. Clara had tea ready on the table with a nice ham, for she knew what her father's dinners were on Assize days.

"Well, papa," she said, "is it over? How's the verdict?"

"For Miss Needham, of course," replied Lawyer Freer, throwing aside his wig and bag, for when fatigued he was addicted to sitting, in private life, in his bald head. "I knew we should have it. There was a clapping of hands in Court when it was delivered. Just get me my slippers, Clara. Where's your sister?"

"She went out after breakfast, telling Nancy she was going to Court with Mrs. Stevens, and might not be home till late."

"Told Nancy she was going to Court!" uttered the amazed lawyer, pausing in the act of pulling off his boots. "*My* daughter to appear in a public Assize Court! If Squire Turnbull should hear—good heavens, Louisa must be out of her mind! And where were my eyes that I did not see her? Ring the bell, Clara."

"I thought it very extraordinary, papa," rejoined Clara, not sorry to get her sister into a row.

"Nancy," cried the lawyer, in a fume, when the housemaid appeared, "go instantly to Mrs. Stevens, ask to speak to Miss Louisa, and tell her it is my desire that she return home with you immediately. Stay—call at Ford's and take a fly; go in it and return in it. A pretty night Assize night is for women to be in the streets," muttered the discomfited lawyer.

No sooner had Nancy departed than there came a rat-tat-tat to the street door, and in walked the Reverend Mr. Whistler, ushered in by the cook, who, to her own mortification, happened that day, of all days in the year, not to have "cleaned" herself. The lawyer stared, and Clara stared, for the parson had arrayed himself in evening attire, white kid gloves, silk stockings, pumps and tights.

Tights in every sense of the word. They had long lain by, unused, and the parson, upon getting them out, found he had grown stouter. He went all over as red as his hunting-coat, and sat down dreadfully embarrassed, feeling convinced he had mistaken the night, and ready to swear—if he had not been a parson—at his own stupidity. Clara asked if he would take a cup of tea, and he stammered that he would, though he hated tea like poison.

“ You must allow me to congratulate you, sir,” he began, believing he was expected to say something about the wedding, and clearing his throat to help overcome his diffidence. “ I was sorry not to have had that pleasure this morning.”

Lawyer Freer knew of no cause for congratulation, saving the verdict in favour of Mrs. Agatha Needham. “ Thank you,” he said ; “ it is not a pleasant thing to lose a cause.”

The parson expected his host to say "daughter," and if the word sounded to his ear like "cause," he attributed it to his own bewilderment.

"Indeed it is not," answered the parson. "I remember when my sister was married, my mother and the bridesmaids cried all day."

The attorney looked up with undisguised astonishment, and Miss Freer certainly was laughing. He felt sure it was at those wretched tights, and pushed his legs back under his chair as far as he could without overbalancing himself.

"Were you amused in Court to-day?" was his next question, addressing Miss Freer.

"In Court! I?" cried Clara.

"It was her sister who went," broke in the lawyer, "my youngest daughter. Clara would not have acted so indiscreetly. Louisa's not come home yet."

"Your youngest daughter went to the hall

to-day!" echoed the clergyman, staring in his turn. "That is rather—rather uncommon—is it not?"

"Uncommon? It's unpardonable."

"And Mr. Elliot—was he there, too?"

"Mr. Elliot!" roared the attorney, firing at the name. "I don't know anything about Mr. Elliot. What's Mr. Elliot to me?"

"A—a—a—no quarrel, or misunderstanding, I hope, since the morning?" cried the parson, hopelessly mystified.

"Not that I am aware of, sir," coldly answered the offended attorney.

"I supposed they were leaving the town to-day," returned Mr. Whistler. "Indeed, I believed they had left it."

Mr. Freer considered, and came to the conclusion that the "they" must have reference to the learned judges. "What, leave before the Assizes are over!" he echoed. "That would be a new move."

"Oh, I comprehend ; they are going to remain for the Assizes?"

"Why, what should take them away before?" demanded the attorney, pushing back his chair a few inches, and beginning to think his guest a candidate for Bedlam. "Would you have the business finished by a serjeant?"

The parson coughed, wondering whether the sedate lawyer was joking, or what on earth he meant, and altogether completely at sea. At that same moment, the cook entered : "Mrs. Agatha Needham's compliments ; she was exceedingly sorry to trouble Mr. Freer, but had he seen anything of her nephew ? Nobody had heard of him since the morning ; Mr. Dicks had sent after him a dozen times, and Mrs. Agatha feared he was being led astray by some of those people in wigs who were crowding the town."

"I know nothing of him," growled the

lawyer; "*nothing*. My respects to Mrs. Needham herself."

Before the cook could turn away with the message, a fly was heard to stop at the door, and in came Nancy. "Mrs. Stevens's kind regards to Mr. and Miss Freer: she had been at home all day, but Miss Louisa had not called." The lawyer was seriously disturbed now.

"You may rely upon it, sir," interposed the clergyman, "that there is some mistake, and they are gone."

"Gone? who gone? gone where?" said Mr. Freer, in agitation. "Nancy, run in to Mrs. Blake's, and see if she is there."

"But, sir," persisted the vicar, "you may be sure they have left the town. I cannot say that I saw the carriage drive off with them, but I certainly heard it."

"Good angels help him!" ejaculated Mr. Freer; "he'll want a strait-waistcoat before

the night is out. What the dickens have the judges to do with Louisa?"

"The judges!" echoed the parson aghast. "I beg pardon—I was not speaking or thinking of the judges. I mean that your daughter has left with Mr. Tom Elliot. There's no doubt of it."

"Were your mind in a sane state, sir, you should be made to account for your vile insinuation," cried the man of law, in his sharpest tones. "How dare you couple my daughter's name with a parcel of shameless reprobates? Tom Elliot indeed!"

"Well, this beats bull-baiting," uttered the amazed parson. "I think if anybody's mad it's yourself, sir. I have not insinuated a breath against your daughter, or thought of her in connection with reprobates. But what more natural than that she should leave the town with her husband?"

"And pray, sir," said Mr. Freer, with

forced calmness, thinking it might be better to humour his vicar till he had procured assistance, “as you say my daughter has a husband, perhaps you will inform me when she was married, and who married her?”

“Why, *I* married her, sir; married her this morning to Mr. Tom Elliot. Married them at your own request, sir.”

Lawyer Freer, who had risen, sank back in his chair and broke out into a white heat.

“What do you suppose, sir, brought me here to-night but your own invitation to celebrate the wedding? Brought me in these kickshaw things,” added the unhappy parson, pushing out his feet and exhibiting the tights and pumps.

“Oh, papa!” screamed Clara, “I see it all! Tom Elliot and Louisa are married.”

“Married, Miss Freer; what should hinder them? Here’s your papa’s note—‘Mr. Freer presents his compliments,’ and so on—request-

ing me to perform the ceremony at ten this morning, which I did," said Mr. Whistler, thrusting his hands into his pockets for the note. Alas! he was in momentary oblivion of having sported the uncomfortable tights: the note was in the pantaloons he had left at home.

Clara Freer went off into strong hysterics, and the lawyer into an explosion of stronger expletives. The clergyman came in for his share of the latter, Mr. Freer insisting that he ought to have ascertained whether the note really came from him before marrying a child like Louisa to a graceless medical student.

"How could I suspect anything wrong?" asked the parson. "The handwriting was like a lawyer's, and, of course, I thought it was yours. I heard, some time ago, that Mr. Tom Elliot was paying his addresses to one of your daughters, so that when the note came it seemed but a natural sequence."

"And did you hear, pray, that Mr. Tom Elliot had been turned out of my house for it?" demanded the lawyer.

"I don't think I did : that sort of thing is not in my way much. But if I had, I should only have concluded that the quarrel was made up again, when this request of yours came."

"Request of mine, sir! How dare you call it so? Don't I tell you it was a wicked forgery? and nobody but a fool would have been taken in by it. It will be the ruin of Louisa."

"I am very sorry," deprecated the Reverend Simon. "I would join in undoing the wedding if I could. Is it any use following them? I'll go in pursuit for one, if you like, sir. My hunter's as fresh as a daisy to-night."

"Pursuit!" reiterated the irritated Lawyer Freer. "Eight o'clock at night, and ten

hours' start! What use do you think pursuit would be now? And I would advise you, sir, as a lawyer, not to countenance these clandestine matches in future, or your bishop may stop your power to perform them in a way you won't like."

"I wish he would," answered the brow-beaten parson. "I wish he'd unlicense St. Luke's for marriages. I'd rather do fifty funerals all in a day than one wedding. I would, indeed."

So Mr. Tom Elliot got clear off with his prize.





CHAPTER IX.

CHELSON.

THE shadow of changes was coming over Seaford. Mr. Coomes fell ill, and died ; and Mr. Halliwell was only performing the duty in the interregnum that occurred until the appointing of another incumbent. Alfred had been very well liked during the time that he had filled the office of curate at Seaford, and the parishioners were in hopes that whoever was appointed to the living would keep him on. Failing anything better, he would have been glad of it himself, but an influential man, a friend of the late Major Halliwell's, had

promised to interest himself in a certain quarter, and try and obtain for him an incumbency.

Hester was outgrowing her sorrow ; but it was a work of time. Her dreams, and perhaps her waking thoughts, would sometimes present confused images of a muddy river, into which a desperate man had leaped and sunk. The random words of the Swiss governess induced this. The Seafords, after the second winter there, left the castle and went abroad, and no tidings whatever had been heard of George Archer.

In spite of Hester's silence, and absence of all allusion to the subject, Mrs. Halliwell saw that a change of scene would be beneficial to her, and she sent her to spend this summer at Middlebury with Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell : many a pleasant month had Hester spent there in her youth. She did not return until September, and the first news that greeted

her was that Alfred was appointed to a living in Chelson, and had just departed for it. It was but a poor appointment. The living was set down as worth £170 per annum, but the net income scarcely realized £140. Alfred sent them word that Chelson was a pretty place, and its inhabitants showed him much kindness and hospitality.

Again the winter went on, and the spring, monotonously enough. An Indian letter, now and then, from Mrs. Pepper, and a flying visit from Aunt Copp, were the only variations. Mrs. Halliwell, Hester and Lucy were alone, Mary being then at a finishing school. The new vicar, Mr. Williams, was a young man, and they became very intimate with his wife.

One day in the late spring, Mrs. Halliwell, who was reading a letter just received from Alfred, appeared to fall into a reverie, now musing, now referring to the letter.

"What are you puzzled about, mamma?" asked Lucy.

"I am not puzzled, child, but I was thinking."

"Of what?"

"That it is unkind of us, as Alfred says, to suffer him to be there so long alone."

"When Alfred left, you promised him that you would go yourself, mamma," returned Lucy.

"Ay," she answered, in a somewhat curious tone, "I did say so, but I must visit by deputy. Children, I think you must have noticed that I am breaking fast."

"Breaking, mamma!" almost merrily exclaimed Lucy; "you are only two or three and fifty. People don't break till they are seventy."

"Painful disorders—and incurable—come on at all ages, Lucy."

"But you have none," was Lucy's answer.

"You look as well as ever, and your colour is as bright." Hester, however, sat in awe-struck silence, looking at her mother.

"My dears," said Mrs. Halliwell, "I am not well. I have known it some time."

Hester rose and approached her mother. "Dearest mamma," she said, in low tones, which she compelled to calmness, "if you have reason to suspect that anything is the matter with you, let us know it. What," she added, in a quicker tone, as a recollection suddenly came over her, "what did Mr. Davis want here yesterday? Was it only a call? I thought it was."

"I sent privately for him, Hester," returned Mrs. Halliwell.

"Oh, mamma!" interrupted Lucy, bursting into tears, for she was very excitable, "tell us what it is."

"If you will not be foolish, I will tell you. Indeed, it is nothing to be alarmed at. I may

live many years. Hester, you are looking frightened also. I did not mean to alarm you, only to give you a reason for my not going out visiting. I suppose I have introduced my subject too abruptly."

"Mamma," said Hester, but very quietly, "you are keeping us in suspense."

"Children, I have heart complaint. I have long thought that this fluttering which comes on, and this difficulty of breathing, with other symptoms, must have something to do with the heart. I sent yesterday for Mr. Davis, and he confirms my opinion."

"There are many sorts of heart disease," breathed Hester. "Which——"

"He called it dilatation of the heart," interrupted Mrs. Halliwell, "combined with another long word which I really cannot remember. Hyper—something—it began."

"Did Mr. Davis say there was any danger?"

"No immediate danger whatever. I may live, as I told you, many years. It will, however, no doubt, be my death at last."

In spite of her self-control, Hester burst into tears. "Oh, mother! you have taken away all the happiness that was left to me."

"Hester! do not speak like that. See how calm I am. My dear children, if we are to be thus afflicted at the mention of death, how shall we be fit to meet it when it comes? Have you both profited so little by your childhood's hymn?"

"What hymn?" sobbed Lucy.

"Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.'

My darling children, until we acquire this peace within us, it is impossible that we can be happy. I trust it is mine: let that console you. In time I pray that it may be yours."

"What did Mr. Davis say?" asked Hester.

‘He only confirmed my own suspicions and detailed the nature of the disease. I must live an absolutely quiet life, very abstemious and regular ; and for other remedies that may be requisite, he will order them, as occasion shall arise. There was no reason, he assured me, why I should not make an old woman yet, provided I took care of myself. But now you see,’ she added, smiling, ‘why I may not go galloping over the country to pay visits, as you young ones may.’

“Mamma,” said Hester, “if you could be removed quietly, by easy stages, to Chelson, the change might benefit you.”

“No, my dear, it would be sure to do me harm, let me travel as quietly as I would. My going from home is out of the question ; so it must be one of you. Now, which shall it be ?”

“Lucy, of course,” observed Hester.

"Hester, not me," said Lucy. "I would not leave you, mamma."

They had both spoken at once, and a friendly dispute ensued. Neither would leave Mrs. Halliwell; and she sat and laughed at them. The knowledge of her state did not seem to affect her spirits in the least. "I think you must let me decide," she interposed at length.

"You had better, mamma. If one of us must really go."

"Then I say Hester," rejoined Mrs. Halliwell. "Alfred is so incapable of anything like domestic management, that I dare say his house and its affairs—what is the French word for it, Lucy? we have no good one—have never been set going in proper order yet. And, as Hester excels in these things, and you do not, Lucy, she had better go."

Thus it was decided. And the last week

in May Hester quitted Seaford for Chel-
son.

There was no rail to the place in those days, only three stage-coaches, and she started by the early one. The glistening dew was still on the fields, the birds were singing, the hedge-flowers opening, and the various points of the landscape, as they drove on, stood out, clear and lovely, against the morning sky. Her fellow-passengers were two pleasant, elderly ladies, who pressed egg sandwiches upon her. She asked if they knew Chelson. Yes, they answered, they lived within a few miles of it; it was a pretty place, containing a good many Dissenters.

“ There are two churches,” Hester eagerly observed: “ St. Stephen’s and St. Paul’s.”

“ But they have been so badly managed that a great many have seceded from them to become Dissenters,” one of the ladies

replied. "There's some rare fun going on at Chelson just now, though, as we heard a few days ago in a letter."

"What is it?" inquired Hester.

"They have a new clergyman at one of the churches, I forget which, and the ladies are turning his head with attention and flattery. It is a hot pursuit with them; Chelson has not been so lively for years. It is sure to be the case where there is a bachelor clergyman."

Hester wondered whether they could be speaking of Alfred. But she thought not; he had too much steady good sense for anything of this sort.

At four o'clock she reached Chelson, and was surprised to find no one waiting for her at the coach-office. A porter took charge of her luggage, and showed her the way to the vicarage. The church, an old gray building, covered with moss, lay very low; a descent

of several steps led to the churchyard, and the vicarage was close to it, the long dank grass touching the walls of the house. The porter halted his truck at the steps, and shouldered one of the boxes, whilst Hester went down, crossed the churchyard, and knocked at the vicarage door.

"If this house is not damp," began Hester to herself, but stopped in surprise, for at least a dozen heads appeared at one of the windows, peeping at her. She thought the porter had made a mistake.

"Are you sure this is St. Stephen's vicarage? The Reverend Alfred Halliwell's?" she hastily asked.

"Oh, quite sure, miss," he replied, smiling at her idea of his being mistaken, and probably following the bent of her thoughts, for he added: "I think the new vicar have got his sewing-party to-day."

"Sewing-party!" uttered Hester.

"The ladies meets at his house once a week, miss, and makes clothes for the poor."

The door was flung open by a middle-aged woman in black, with spectacles on her nose, and gray hair sticking out. Mr. Halliwell appeared behind her. And then Hester found there had been a mistake, either in her mother's wording of her letter, or in his reading of it, for he had not expected her till the evening coach at nine o'clock.

The luggage was put in the passage—a very narrow one—and then Mr. Halliwell introduced her to the parlour. Fifteen or sixteen ladies, of various ages, up to five-and-thirty, sat round a table, which was piled up with calico, flannel and coloured prints. "My eldest sister," said he. "Mrs. Zink, Miss Dewisson, Miss——"

Hester heard no more. She thought she should have been smothered. The whole bevy started up, and fell upon her.

She had a great dislike to being kissed, but what was she to do? Mrs. Zink, a stout lady, rising fifty, the wife of a professional man in Chelson, was the only married lady present. She offered to chaperone Hester upstairs, and Alfred thanked her.

It was a poor, old-fashioned house, containing five rooms besides the kitchen, which was built at the back. The ceilings were miserably low : Hester could touch the beams with her hand. There were two parlours—one on either side the door ; two bedrooms over—Mr. Halliwell's, and the one meant for Hester ; and one room above, in what Hester would have called the roof, but which she there heard styled the “cock-loft.”

“ What a number of bonnets !” exclaimed Hester, when she came in view of her bed.

“ My dear Miss Halliwell, I hope you will excuse it,” said Mrs. Zink—it struck Hester as being the oddest name she had ever heard.

"We have been in the habit of putting our things there, on the Tuesday afternoons, and although the room was made ready for you, we did the same to-day. Indeed, there was no other place. The second parlour has the tea laid out in it, and of course the young ladies would rather be skinned than invade the privacy of the vicar's bedroom. Did you wonder at seeing so many here, all at work?"

"A little, at first," answered Hester.

"Ah! your dear brother has had the labour of a horse before him. The parish was in the most neglected state when he came to it; religion and morality were not thought of amongst the poor, and the children were a race of heathens. What Mr. Halliwell would have done without us, I don't know. We have organized everything for him: schools and book-clubs, and district-visiting ladies, and coal-and-provident meetings, and sewing-for-the-poor societies, and all else requisite,

so that he really has no trouble, except his Sunday duties."

"But—pardon me—if the lady-parishioners are so very kind as to accomplish this good, of themselves, why could they not have done it in the time of the last vicar, or at least have prevented things from getting as you describe?"

"My dear Miss Halliwell, there must be a head: your brother has to be referred to on all occasions. In any little doubt or difficulty we fly to him, and indeed we never like to hold a meeting unless he is present. Now, Mr. Clarke, the last vicar (a very good old soul, in the abstract), was as deaf as a post and a martyr to rheumatism. There would have been no satisfaction in working for him. For the last five years of his life he had to be dragged into church by Betty and the beadle, and did all the duty from the reading-desk."

"Is my brother liked here?" Hester ventured to inquire.

"Liked! he is adored," returned Mrs. Zink. "And the greatest pleasure we enjoy is looking after his domestic comforts. He seems to have as much notion of home-management as the curate at the other church has of preaching."

"He was always deficient in that sort of usefulness," remarked Hester. "I think clergymen frequently are."

"Ah, poor things!" aspirated Mrs. Zink; "these inexperienced saints of clergymen are like doves, pecked at by every raven that comes near them, in the shape of tradespeople and servants. And they fall into snares so unsuspiciously! Would you believe that your brother was actually going to retain the late vicar's female servant?"

"Indeed," answered Hester, not quite knowing what she might be expected to say.

“To be sure, she is no beauty, and she is turned five-and-forty,” went on Mrs. Zink. “It is Betty, who opened the door for you, the sexton’s sister. He could not understand why she would not do for him, as she had done for the late vicar. But I, and Mrs. Farley, and Mrs. Dewisson, and Mrs. Hook, and a few more, stepped privately up here, and pointed out to Mr. Halliwell that there was a wide difference between old Clarke, going on for eighty and no teeth, and a handsome young man like himself. There certainly *might* not have been any scandal talked in the parish, and I shall never forget the unsuspecting young vicar’s astonished looks at our hinting that it was possible; but we told him that it was better to steer wide and clear, and give it a distant berth. So, until now, nobody has lived in the house with him but the sexton’s son Jim, an extremely handy young man of one-and-twenty.”

"Then has my brother no maid-servant?" inquired Hester, wondering where Mrs. Zink's communications would end.

"He has taken her on now, in expectation of your arrival: she came in yesterday. A sight of dirt, she has just told me, she found to clean up in the house, especially in Jim's bedroom in the cockloft."

"I fear it must have been rather awkward, both for my brother and the young man, to contrive for themselves without a woman-servant," said Hester, not agreeing in the least with the nonsense Mrs. Zink had been talking.

"We have all been proud to do what we could for our dear pastor. When he is dining at home we send him in some little dainty—a custard pudding, or a plate of macaroni, or some raspberry cream—for Jim's skill in cooking only extends to chops and potatoes. But it is rarely he puts

Jim's cooking to the test ; he is constantly invited out, to one parishioner's or another ; they quarrel who shall have him. *I* secured him for the Sunday," added Mrs. Zink triumphantly. "I knew how it would be, the instant I set eyes on him—that every soul would be wanting to snap him up. So I made hay while the sun shone, and engaged him for every Sunday in the year, all the fifty-two, for dinner and tea. Now, Fanny ! what do you want ?"

A pleasant-looking girl had entered, humming a tune. She was Mrs. Zink in miniature, very garrulous and positive.

"Tea is ready, mamma ; and Mr. Halliwell says will you come and make it ?"

Mrs. Zink turned to Hester. "We are having tea early, but it refreshes us. Shall I preside for you this evening, or would you prefer——"

"Oh, if you please, I would much rather

you did it," interrupted Hester. "They are all strange to me."

"Then I'll go on. Fanny, have you finished that pinafore?"

"No, mamma," answered Fanny, with a gesture of impatience. "I have turned it over to Matilda; she will do that and her own work too."

"The most easy job I could find, all straight sewing, and you give it up!" cried Mrs. Zink angrily. "I don't know what is to become of you, Fanny. It is a blessing that Matilda is domesticated and industrious."

"Is she, though?" ejaculated Miss Fanny Zink, in a whisper, nodding her head after her mother, as the latter went downstairs. "Do you like plain sewing, Miss Halliwell?"

"I like it very well," was Hester's reply, "and often have a good deal to do."

"Well, I would as soon be put in the

pillory. Mamma brings me here on the Tuesday afternoons, and I enjoy coming, myself, for the fun of it, but I don't do a stitch more than I can avoid. I call it a most detestable mania that they have got up since the new vicar came."

"If you so much dislike work, you should leave it for those who are fond of it," smiled Hester.

"None of them are. It's all put on. And if it were not for—something—they would not do any. Look at Matilda: she would not touch a needle at home, if she were paid, though she does come here, and sit, nose to knees, for hours, without stirring. I can't, so it's of no use pretending."

Hester had made herself ready by this time, and they went down to^{the} the parlour. Not the one where the sewing was. A very handsome tea was set out, Mrs. Zink presiding. The cups and saucers were blue

and gold, and a small fringed damask napkin was on each plate. Bread-and-butter, rolls, biscuits, watercress, radishes, marmalade, potted tongue, damson cheese, and a pint jug of cream. Hester saw it with astonishment : if her brother had thought to provide the one half of this, his housekeeping talents must have wonderfully improved.

What they seemed to want most was room. And how the chairs for eighteen were stowed into that little parlour must ever be a mystery. Not many could sit round the table ; the rest put their chairs where they could, face to face, or back to back, as they would go in, and held their plates on their laps. When Betty or Jim came in with fresh supplies of hot water, it was taken from them at the door, for there was no getting inside. Jim seemed to enjoy the party as much as anyone ; there was a good-humoured laugh on his face, which never left it. He was a

simple-minded young man, very anxious to please, and in bodily fear of his aunt Betty. But to see the attentions lavished by the ladies upon their minister! "Mr. Halliwell, let me give you a little marmalade. I know it is good, for I made it with my own hands." "Oh, Mr. Halliwell, allow me to spread it for you." "Dear Mr. Halliwell, do taste the potted tongue! Now I superintended it myself, and there's just the flavour of spice you like." "Mr. Halliwell, I am peeling this radish for you, and you must eat it. I will answer for their being fresh, for I pulled them out of our own garden." "Just look, Mr. Halliwell, what a beautiful piece of damson cheese! I have cut it for you. Mamma prides herself upon her damson cheese, and I always assist with it." "My dear, good Mr. Halliwell, I beg your pardon! I did not perceive your cup was empty. Permit me to pass it." And this kept on all

tea-time, so that by the time it was over, the Reverend Alfred Halliwell, who was naturally diffident, had a face as red as the radishes.

They turned to the sewing again afterwards, and left about half-past eight o'clock, he going with them. Hester then went into the kitchen, and asked Betty for a candle, thinking she would have a look round her brother's bedroom, and see if things were comfortable for him.

"My goodness!" she uttered, when she found herself there. She had never seen such a room: the state it was in would have turned her mother crazy. Mrs. Halliwell used to reproach Alfred with never keeping his drawers straight: she should have seen these, inside and out.

"Ah, miss, you may well stare," said Betty, who had followed. "When I first see this room yesterday, I heaved up my hands and

eyes. And when I spoke to master about it, he looked round as if he see it then for the first time. But he did say that he never could find his things when he wanted them. Wouldn't I like to have the shaking of that Jim!"

" My brother never does see anything but his books and pens," said Hester. " What are all these rolled up here ?"

" Clean shirts which have got the buttons off," responded Betty. " It have been master's plan, I hear, when he have put on a shirt and found a button gone, to tug it off again and cram it, anyways, into the drawers, or toss it on the top, so that I b'lieve he have not got above a couple of shirts to wear. As if that Jim could not have folded them up after him ; and sewed the buttons on too, if he liked, the proud monkey ! Them are stockings, miss, and they have no fellows that I can see, and

there ain't one in the whole stock but have nine or ten holes in it as big as half-a-crown."

"They will never mend!" exclaimed Hester, looking at stocking after stocking in dismay.

"Not to much account," answered Betty. "Mr. Jim ought to be made to pay for new ones. He might have bought some darning-cotton and a needle, and caught up the holes, not have let 'em go on to this. I took a pair down yesterday, after master went out to dinner at five, and when he come home at half after ten I hadn't got through the first. And oh, miss, you should have seen Jim's room in the cock-loft! He had been a cutting up of wood in it, and never cleared up the chips, and drops of taller was splashed on the boards, and a hole burnt in one corner of the sheet. I'd put Master Jim in a press-gang for two months and make him work, if I had my will."

"Where did this come from?" inquired Hester, espying a handsome white satin pin-cushion on the dressing-table. "And what pretty scent-bottles!"

"They come from one or another of 'em," replied Betty. "I dare say Jim knows which. It have been as good as a theatre-play to him."

"From one or another of what?" repeated Hester, not understanding.

"From the young ladies what's after master. The house is full of their presents. You just wait till to-morrow morning, miss, you'll see something then. Why, miss, there ain't one of that sixteen what was here to-night but is ready to rush into his arms, whether he'll open them or not. All them niceties you saw on the table for tea was brought here by one or t'other: pretending, to master, that they had made the jams and things themselves, that he might get think-

ing what a useful wife they'd make him. The cups and saucers was lent by Mrs. Zink—she's a deep one, she is—and them fringed cloths on the plates was give by Mrs. Dove. When they first got up' these sewing-parties they held 'em at their own houses, by turns. And what made 'em propose to hold 'em at the vicarage? Why, because master should be present, for that's all they care for, not for the sewing or the poor ; and they couldn't for shame ask him to a stitching-meeting. The mothers be more cunning than the daughters, and that's a fact. I wonder master ain't druv clean off his head with the two. Here comes master ! he is soon home to-night."

Hester quitted the room with Betty, leaving it as it was until morning. "Where do you sleep ?" she inquired.

"Up there, miss, in the cock-loft."

"I thought that was Jim's room."

"Jim left when I came in, miss. He is to come of a day, to fetch and carry messages. The notes master has to send the ladies, in answer to their'n, is enough to exercise Jim's legs."

When Hester made her appearance in the parlour the following morning, she wondered what in the world had come to it. The back of every chair was decorated off with a white netted covering. And not only the chairs, but the ends of the little sofa, and also the two stools, which were not of common horsehair, like the rest of the furniture, but elegant pieces of embroidery in floss silks. She had never met with these white things before ; they have become universal since, but her opinion is that Chelson gave rise to the fashion, for she saw none anywhere else for years afterwards.

"I knew you would be dazed, miss," cried Betty in triumph. "I had got 'em in the

wash-tub yesterday. They was pretty black when I came, for this room smokes like anything, and I sat up to dry and finish 'em after you went to bed."

"What do you call them? What are they for?" asked Hester, pleased with the novel sight.

"Well, miss, they ain't of no use, they are for ornament; they gets tumbled, and they gets on the floor, and the cotton fluff from 'em gets on to the gentlemen's clothes. I calls 'em chair-sacks, but that ain't the quality name. There's a set for master's bedroom, which haven't been put on yet; and Jim did hear, miss," added Betty, dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper, "that the ladies was a consulting whether they might not do some to put on the pulpit cushions."

Hester was admiring them still, for they gave a light, pretty appearance to the low,

dark room and its plain furniture, when her brother entered. "How gay you are, Alfred!" she said.

"Gay! Oh, with these anti-macassars. A senseless name for them, insinuating that we all use hair-oil."

"Who made them?"

"Miss—let me see—Miss Dewisson, I think it was, made this set."

"Betty says there are some for your bedroom."

"Yes. Emma Farley made those. You had better put them in yours. I have not used them."

"And who worked you these foot-stools, Alfred?"

"Oh, that was a joint-stock affair, I believe. Five or six joined, and presented them."

The vicarage was inundated that day with callers, so that its inmates could hardly

snatch their early dinner. The visits were ostensibly to Hester, but she thought they were really meant for Alfred. One of them, Miss Butler, who came with her aunt, left a thin parcel of tissue-paper in Mr. Halliwell's hands, expressing a hope that he would find the contents useful. He opened it as soon as she was gone.

"Look here, Hester! Do you think I can wear these?"

It was a pair of fine bands, hem-stitched and trimmed round with a sort of lace, very narrow, the work of the hand.

"Of course you cannot wear them," was Hester's astonished reply. "I never heard of any bands but plain ones being worn. What possesses all the ladies you have come amongst?"

Mr. Halliwell laughed.

"I never met with so good-natured a set as these Chelson people. Hester, I do think

I might wear these ; I do not like to appear ungrateful."

" You cannot wear the bands," peremptorily returned Hester. " Don't talk nonsense. I wish my mother could have come here instead of me."

" Why so ?"

" Because, Alfred, you are running into danger, and need warning counsel. When a parcel of women can beset a clergyman, because he happens to be unmarried, as these Chelson people are besetting you, my opinion is that they possess neither judgment nor modesty. And I am sure they have no religion."

" Hester, I strive to do right—to adhere to the line of duty."

" I believe you wish to do so, Alfred. But they are rendering it difficult."

On the following Sunday morning, as Hester was passing upstairs to get ready for

church, her brother's door stood open, and she espied these identical bands laid out on his dressing-table, side by side with a pair of plain ones. Hester felt grievously vexed, for it convinced her he was debating with himself whether he should wear them. She darted in, seized them on the spur of the moment, flew quietly down the stairs, popped them into Betty's kitchen fire, and flew back again. Presently he came up and went into his chamber: he had been preparing the bread for the Sacrament, for it was the first Sunday in June.

"Hester," he called out, "have you taken those bands of Miss Butler's?"

"I taken them!" she answered, frightened to death; "what should bring me with them? It is more than half-past ten, Alfred. Make haste."

"Did you think the wind was very high this morning?" he presently asked again.

Hester sat down to laugh, and thought she should have choked. He imagined they had blown out at the window. "Oh, very high," responded Hester, when she could speak. "Don't you see the poplars blowing about?"

Mr. Halliwell said no more, and they went to church, he of course in the plain bands. The church was very full : in the late vicar's time the pews had used to be empty : but (to go to no less legitimate considerations) Alfred Halliwell was a superior reader, and preached practical, excellent sermons. Hester was surprised to see so many young ladies remain for the Sacrament. Nearly every one in the church stayed, and it struck her that she had never before seen so many juvenile communicants.

But when she drew near the table and saw what was on it, her heart stood still and a film gathered before her eyes. There were a couple of lace handkerchiefs, one over the

chalice, the other over the plate that contained the bread, or the alms just collected, she was not sure which. Her brother might *call* them napkins of fair white linen, but they were neither more nor less than worked handkerchiefs : the middle of silky, transparent cambric, and the border, four inches broad, of exquisite lace-work.

Those pieces of lace-work struck upon Hester's heart as being essentially wrong : not in themselves, but as applied to such a purpose. It was impossible not to have the eye diverted by the beauty of the embroidery ; it was next to impossible to keep the mind from reverting to the unworthy motives which had induced the labour and the present to the young bachelor clergyman.

“Who worked—*those*?” she asked as they were walking home across the churchyard.

“Augusta Dove.” He knew at once to

what she alluded. “That young lady in blue, two pews to the left of you.”

“Alfred, it is wrong ; they ought not to be displayed there.”

“I thought so at first. But the ladies were so pertinacious over it, persuading me there could be no possible harm in an innocent piece of industry. So I yielded.”

“I wonder where this will end ?” sighed Hester. “It seems to me that you run, blind-fold, to meet them half way.”

The Reverend Mr. Halliwell remained silent. Perhaps his conscience smote him. Or he may have felt irrevocably fallen into the meshes of the Chelson maids and matrons, and was powerless to extricate himself.



CHAPTER X.

MISS ZINK'S HYSTERICS.

THERE seemed to Hester to be no end of work in the parish ; much more than there need have been, to bring forth so little result. A treat was in agitation for the Sunday-school children, and a dozen meetings were held to consult about it, Mr. Halliwell in the chair, and the ladies round. Meanwhile, he and Hester were invited to a grand evening party at Mrs. Zink's. But when the evening came Hester had to go alone, for he was called out to a sick parishioner.

They were up in arms when she entered

by herself—the whole room. Oh, where was Mr. Halliwell? What was the matter? Was Mr. Halliwell not coming?

"Who is it that has sent for him?" inquired Mrs. Zink, when Hester explained.

"Sally Davis, I think Jim said," she answered.

"There! that old creature is always being taken ill!" uttered Mrs. Zink. "Do you remember, at the Joneses' party in the Christmas week, when we were all so comfortable, dancing a quiet quadrille on the carpet, a message came from Sally Davis that she feared she should not live till morning, and dear Mr. Halliwell was forced to go to Back Lane, through all the cold, in his thin shoes? She is never contented but when she is having prayers read to her. They ought to put her in the workhouse."

"I hope my brother will never feel his

duties irksome," Hester ventured to observe; "and I think he will not."

Just then a young gentleman swung into the room with a discontented air, and dropped into a vacant chair next to Hester. "I say," he whispered to her, "is not this precious slow?"

"Do you think so?" she politely replied.

"What has taken the parson, that he is not here yet? Do you know?"

"Mr. Halliwell has been called out to someone who is ill," said Hester. "He may not be able to come at all."

"My! you don't mean that! Won't they be savage! That serves ma right, for not letting me go boating. Because some of us fellows upset a skiff the other day, and got a ducking, she swore I should never go near the water again. We had made up a jolly rowing party for this evening, and when I was stealing off to it, she pounced upon me

in the hall, and we had a regular quarrel. I told her I would go, so she laid hold of me, and hallooed out for the governor, who came out of the office and put in his word, and they made me dress and come in here."

"Are you Master Zink?"

"I am Mister Zink, if you please," returned the young gentleman. "When a fellow's going on for seventeen, I should think that's old enough to be Mister. I say, though, isn't it a game about the parson? They have been mad over this blow-out: trying on dresses, figuring off before the glass, practising songs: all for him. And now he doesn't show. By Jove! if it's not good! There's more fuss made with that parson than with all Chelson."

"Who is that?" inquired Hester, thinking it might be well to turn the conversation, and directing his attention to a quiet-looking girl in lilac muslin.

"That! That's Mab."

"Who, sir?"

"Mabel Zink, my sister. The missis" (Mister Zink's familiar name for his mother) "keeps her in the background, till Mat and Fan are got off. I say, how old should you think Mat is?"

"I heard your mamma say that Miss Zink was turned twenty."

"And a jolly long turn, too. She was twenty-seven last birthday, and Fan's going on for twenty-five. Why, Mabel's twenty!"

"But don't you think we might talk about something else?" interposed Hester. "Your sisters may not like to have their ages discussed."

"They can lump it. Mat and Fan magged out as loud as the missis against my going boating, but I said if they made me come in here I'd spoil sport. They fight and scratch each other after the new parson: meta-

phorically, you know ; but they'd like to do it in earnest, if it could be kept from his ears. The missis favours Matilda, because she's the eldest, and it is her turn to go off first ; but he may have the pick of the two, I can tell you."

"Are you fond of singing ?" questioned Hester, hoping that might divert the young gentleman.

"Yes, I am, over the left," retorted Mister Zink. "I get rather too much of it for that. Mat and Fan are squalling against time from morning till night, since they found out the parson had a voice. I told them to-day that if they thought to hook him by noise, they might find themselves in the wrong box, for which I had to make a bolt. I wish he had never come near the place, I do."

"I am sorry he should be so unfortunate as to have displeased you."

"It is so naggering, you see," proceeded

Mister Zink. "A fellow was left free as a hare before, but deuce a bit of that now. One halloos out, 'Tray, go and change those dirty boots: Mr. Halliwell's coming to tea.' Then the other screams, 'Tray, for goodness sake go and make yourself decent! what an object you are! your head's like a mop! we expect Mr. Halliwell.' Last night we had a sharp dispute over it. I wanted Tom Fisher in: they said rude chaps like Tom Fisher were not society for the parson, and wouldn't let him come. So I walked myself out, and never came in till half-past eleven, and got a rowing from the missis and the governor. And one dare not leave as much as a flea in the drawing-room. I put a fishing-rod in the corner the other day, and they squealed after me as if it had been a serpent: 'Now, Tray, don't bring these things here! we can't have this room made into a litter; Mr. Halliwell may be calling.' I thought a parson

was a peaceable man. I should be ashamed, if I were one, to cause the rumpus in a house that he does in this."

"But, really," urged Hester, "it appears to me that the 'rumpus' is not his fault."

"Well, I know I'm sick of it, and I wish he would marry one of the girls, and put a stop to the humbugging. I shouldn't care whether it was one of my sisters or anybody else's—though precious glad I should be for those two eldest to cut it out of here. Shall you try for him, now you are come?"

He put the question so quaintly, in a joke, as Hester supposed, that she could not forbear laughing.

"If you don't, you'll be an exception to everybody here. I'm sick of the idiots. I think Mab's making up to him, on the sly. And I suppose Amy would, if she had the chance."

"Who is Amy?" questioned Hester.

"She's next to Fan—between her and Mabel. She lives at my old aunt's, and never comes to Chelson. The governor's aunt, you know ; as cranky an old creature as ever was known. I wonder Amy can put up with her ; but she ought to give thanks to be out of here, just now. There's the same row going on in the other houses over the parson that there is in this. Have you not twigged it at Mother Farley's?"

"I have not been to Mrs. Farley's yet," answered Hester.

"Not been—— Why, who do you mean to say you are, if you are not living there ? Aren't you the little Farley's new governess?"

"No, I am Mr. Halliwell's sister : staying at the vicarage."

"Oh, my eye !" exclaimed the young gentleman with emphasis, as he stared at Hester with a blank look of amazement.
"Well, I have put my foot in it ! I'll make

myself scarce. Not that I care, ma'am, if you do tell the parson," he added, coming back again after springing from his seat. "The missis and the girls will believe me, for another time, that when I say I'll spoil sport, I mean to do it."

He crossed the room to his sister Mabel, telling her, no doubt, of his awkward mistake, for her face turned crimson as she glanced at Hester. Presently he commenced to drag her across the room towards Hester.

"Now, Tracy! now Mabel!" exclaimed Mrs. Zink, "what are you about?"

For answer, Master Tracy pushed his sister into the chair he had vacated by Hester, and in the bustle of this, Mr. Halliwell came in. He was rapturously received, and requested to "sit here," and "sit there," but he drew a chair near to his sister and Mabel.

"How is it you never come to the working parties?" he asked of the latter.

She blushed so prettily that she quite won Hester's heart—indeed, she seemed to do nothing else but blush—and glanced at Mr. Halliwell with her shy eyes. "Mamma thinks Matilda and Fanny enough to go—that I should only be in the way. And perhaps she is right, for I do not like work."

"You are very different from everyone else in Chelson," remarked Mr. Halliwell. "They like nothing so well."

"I like fancy-work," said Mabel.

"And music?" asked Hester.

"Oh yes, and music. I like that better than anything. I wanted to make acquaintance with you before, Miss Halliwell, but they would not give me the opportunity. I wish you would invite me to spend an evening all alone with you at

the vicarage. Mamma and my sisters will never bring me of their own accord."

"Come to-morrow evening," interrupted Mr. Halliwell.

"Oh, if I might!" she uttered, clasping her hands with the prettiest expression of helplessness. "If you could only get leave for me, Miss Halliwell."

Music was introduced after tea. Nearly everyone in the room sang, excepting Hester and Mabel. Hester could not, and Mabel was not asked. When Hester requested permission for her to visit them the following evening, Mrs. Zink seemed inclined to substitute Matilda, but Hester pressed for Mabel.

Accordingly, the next afternoon, Mabel went to the vicarage. Hester was really charmed with her; she thought her a very nice girl, of simple, winning manners. They persuaded her to sing, though they had no instrument, and Hester was astonished

at her voice. It was of rare quality, and had been well trained.

"The school treat is arranged at last," remarked Mr. Halliwell, in the course of the evening. "It is to be next Monday, in Clebbery Ground. The children will enjoy themselves in the open air so much more than in the confined schoolroom. Clebbery——"

"Do not tell me about it," interrupted Mabel, in an earnest, almost an impassioned tone. "It will only make me long to go."

"But you will go, will you not?" said Mr. Halliwell.

Mabel shook her head. "I am not allowed to go out with Matilda and Fanny. It is hard to be put aside for them always, and I feel it." She raised her charming blue eyes to his for one moment as she spoke, and when they dropped, their eyelashes were glistening with tears.

At eight o'clock a servant arrived for Miss Mabel. When she was ready the vicar said he would walk with her.

"Oh no, indeed, thank you, Mr. Halliwell," she returned, colouring crimson; "pray do not think of taking *me*."

"Why not?" he inquired.

"If it were anyone but me—of course—but they will say I have no right to monopolize your time or to give you trouble."

He laughed, and drew her arm through his, and Hester watched them across the churchyard, the maid following.

The next Monday rose delightfully, and amidst the many faces assembled in the schoolroom ready for the departure to Clebbery Ground (a rural spot at a convenient distance from Chelson, much used for pic-nics) Hester saw that of Mabel Zink.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Halliwell!" she

whispered ; "it is all owing to your message that I am here. Mr. Halliwell gave it to mamma, so she could not do otherwise than let me come."

Hester did not remember to have sent any message ; but she thought it very kind of Alfred to beg for Mabel.

The younger children went in a large covered waggon with the provisions ; the elder walked, as did all the visitors—a great number. They arrived there about twelve, amused themselves for an hour or two, and then had dinner. Afterwards they dispersed, some to one part of the grounds, some to another. Mrs. Zink took her station in a grotto, and went to sleep ; Hester sat on the felled stump of a tree outside it, her memory wandering back to bygone years, years that for her never would return. Suddenly they were both startled : Mrs. Zink out of her sleep, and Hester out of her

waking dreams, for Miss Zink came flying up in a state of excitement, darted into the grotto, sank down on the seat by her mother, and went into screaming hysterics.

"What in the name of fortune is it?" uttered the alarmed Mrs. Zink. "What has come to you, Matilda?"

The young lady made no answer, but shrieked and kicked so violently, that Mrs. Zink seized her by the head, and Hester caught hold of her feet.

"Have you been stung by anything?" asked the wondering Mrs. Zink.

"Yes, that's it!" screamed Matilda.

"Where were you stung? Was it a wasp?"

"It was a man!" shrieked Matilda.

"A man! Good patience, Matilda! What can you mean?"

"A man and a sister," persisted Miss Zink. "Oh, the wickedness! oh, the treachery!"

"Has Fanny done anything?"

"Fanny! I wish it had been Fanny. It is that sly, smooth Mabel. I told you not to let her come. I went into that opening by the beeches, and there" (shriek) "I caught them together, making love." (Shriek, shriek.) "He was kissing her" (shriek, shriek, shriek), "he was, mother, as true as we are here!" (shriek, shriek, shriek, shriek).

"I'll lock Mabel up, my dear, as soon as we get her home. Who was kissing her? Mr. Spriggs?"

"Not *that* stupid Simon! he never kisses anybody. It was Mr. Halliwell. Someone ought to write to his bishop."

Mrs. Zink screamed in echo of her daughter, and Hester was so petrified that she let go Miss Zink's feet.

"I never heard of anything so demoralizing as for a parson to kiss," sobbed Miss Matilda. "I wonder where he learnt it? Not in the commandments. He had his

arm round her, and his face glued to hers. Emma Farley and Augusta Dove saw it as well. Of course, he will never attempt to face us from the pulpit again! He must buy a mask."

"I don't believe it," cried Mrs. Zink, who had been collecting her scattered senses. "You must have seen double, Matilda."

"We saw single enough," replied the young lady roughly. "After everything we have done for him! run and worked ourselves to death over disgusting parish business—contaminated our fingers, sewing for those grubs of charity children—had him to our house at all hours and all meals—learnt new songs for him—worn new dresses for him—and to be served in this treacherous way! to be despised and deserted for that little wretch of a Mabel!"

With the last words Miss Zink recommenced her dance. Hester thought she

would leave the grotto, and was gliding from it when she saw her brother approaching, with Mabel on his arm.

"Hester," he sang out, "do you happen to know where Mrs. Zink is?"

"She is here."

"Don't come in!" screamed Matilda, as they drew near the entrance; "don't contaminate us with your presence. Oh, you false—thieves!"

Hester was not sufficiently collected to note all that passed; but she heard her brother say that Mabel had promised to be his wife, provided her parents had no objection. It was Miss Matilda, he intimated, who had caused him to speak so soon; otherwise he should have chosen another time and place.

To describe the discomfiture of the pic-nic party when the news spread would be a difficult task. To have shaken their vicar in a

bag might have relieved their feelings in a measure ; but to shake Mabel to the bottom of the sea and leave her there would have relieved them more effectually. Mrs. Zink alone was composed : when her disappointment about Matilda went off, she subsided into a quiet glow of triumph. She *had* secured him : if not for one daughter, for another.

A Mrs. Rice came up to Hester, and spoke in a confidential tone. "She is the most unsuitable wife your brother could have chosen ; and I am not actuated by *their* motives, Miss Halliwell, in saying so, for my girls are under ten. Mabel Zink ought to marry a rich man, who could keep her in idleness ; for she is an incapable do-nothing, and she will never be anything else. He had better have taken Matilda."

"Mabel is young," rejoined Hester.

"Quite old enough to have distanced the others in the race," quoth Mrs. Rice signifi-

cantly. "She laid her plans deeper than any of them, and she has won."

"Mabel Zink never strove to win Alfred!" uttered Hester.

"So you may think," answered Mrs. Rice. "I have seen a good deal, living, as I do, next door to the Zinks, and always running in and out. Mabel was kept back by her mother, but she put herself forward. She would steal an interview with your brother in the hall and chatter to him ; she would meet him out of doors ; in fact, they were always meeting : and she would put on her pretended shy, attractive, modest ways. I heard her invite herself to your house that evening, and saw through it. Not a young lady in Chelson has laboured more assiduously to catch him than has Mabel Zink."

The words troubled Hester greatly, but she only remarked that she hoped Mabel would make a good wife.

"Not in the prudent sense of the word," observed Mrs. Rice. "Mabel can spend money, but she has no idea of saving it by domestic management. Why, she could not iron a pocket-handkerchief, or scarcely hem one. And she will have no fortune: it is well known that the old lawyer lives up to his income—some say beyond it. Rely upon it, this is the worst day's work she and your brother ever did. To fix on each other is to prepare for struggles and poverty."

A curious recollection darted into Hester's mind then—of the life of struggle promised to them all by her Aunt Copp. She felt very sad, and an impulse she could not restrain urged her to speak to Mabel, who happened to draw near as Mrs. Rice walked away.

"My dear Mabel," she began, "I fear you and my brother ought not to think of

marrying, at least at present. Do you know how very small his living is?"

"Two or three hundred a year."

"Two or three hundred a year!" echoed Hester. "Where can you have received so false an estimate of his income? They call it one hundred and seventy pounds, but there are outgoings, and it does not bring him in more than one hundred and fifty pounds, if so much."

"Oh, that's plenty!" cried Mabel. "A hundred and fifty! It is more than we can spend. And there's the house as well."

"You do not know the value and uses of money. You——"

"Yes, I do," interrupted Mabel. "Mamma always allows me fifteen pounds a year for my clothes, and I have to eke it out by all sorts of contrivances."

"Dear Mabel, there are expenses in a married life which you little foresee or think

of, and they come on very soon. Pray believe that I am full of love, both to you and Alfred, when I suggest that you should reconsider matters, and look to consequences."

"It will be quite fun to economize. I shall like it. As good as our gipsy party to-day. You know we had to drink out of each other's glasses."

"No, Mabel, it will not be fun. You will find that you have plunged yourselves into difficulty and trial."

The nearest approach to a pout or frown that Hester had seen on Mabel Zink's face appeared then. "You are dissatisfied with me, Miss Halliwell; you wish he had chosen Emma Farley, or Mary Hook, or perhaps Matilda! You detest me for winning him, and you don't like me at all."

"My dear Mabel," said Hester, vexed

to be so misconstrued, "the very fact of my speaking thus to you proves that I like and esteem you ; otherwise my remonstrance would have been made to Alfred. I only ask you to reflect, to deliberate, and I urge it for your sake rather than for his ; for in a home of poverty the daily crosses and privations fall more heavily upon the wife than the husband."

"There's nothing to deliberate upon," was Mabel's impatient answer as she escaped from Hester. "Mr. Halliwell's living is plenty to begin upon, and he is sure to get a better one in time."

"Good-night, Miss Halliwell," said Mrs. Hook to Hester, as they gained the town on their return and halted at that lady's door. "A pleasant day we have had. Excuse me," she continued, lowering her voice to a whisper, "but if ever there was a Tom Noodle in this world—and he must

forgive my saying it—it is your brother, for being taken in by that sly cat of a Mabel Zink."

"I wish you a good-evening, ma'am," stiffly said Mrs. Dewisson, when they came in turn to her door, while her daughter offered Hester only one finger to shake; "present my compliments to your brother, and say I wish him joy of his bargain. And I wish Miss Matilda well through her disappointment, for she had set her whole heart and mind upon him. I hope she will not have brain fever."

"The same to you," was the cool reply, when Hester afterwards stopped to say good-night to Mrs. Farley. "If everyone was of my mind, Miss Halliwell, they would bring a general action against your brother for breach of promise, and I shall not hesitate to-morrow to avow my opinion publicly. What business had he to accept all the

presents and the antimacassars, if he knew he had got his eye on that deceitful, die-away Mabel Zink? It would be dishonourable conduct in any man, but it is positive dishonesty in a clergyman."

Hester reached home, glad to be there, and her heart was sore in many ways. Before dinner-time the following day, notes had arrived from three-and-twenty ladies, begging to resign all future aid or participation in parish business. In drawing the ink towards him to write the answers, Mr. Halliwell spilled some over one of the white netted chair coverings. "It is nothing," said he, in his dreamy way.

"Put this into cold water, Betty!" exclaimed Hester, running with it into the kitchen. And Betty hastened to take it from her, as anxious about it as she was.

"You must be careful of these, Alfred," Hester observed, returning to the parlour;

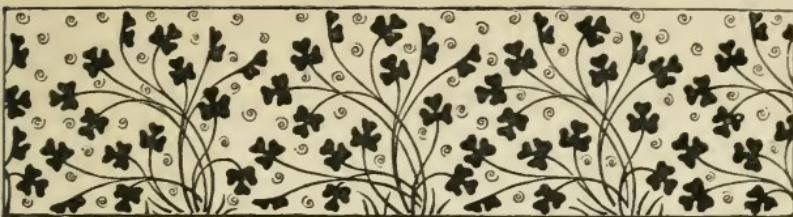
"you will get no more of them, or of anything else."

"No," he answered. But there was a quiet smile on his face, as if he had been more awake to the by-play carried on than Hester had given him credit for.

"No, indeed," she repeated. "When a clergyman makes known to his congregation that he has chosen a wife, let him rest assured he will be troubled with no more antimacassars."

Mrs. Zink hurried on the wedding, and settled it to take place in August. But Hester did not wait for it; she returned home.





CHAPTER XI.

A WEDDING.

AGAIN a few years went on at Seaford—such a few!—and Mrs. Halliwell found she was not likely to make an old woman. The time was coming when she must die. She thought it was not quite so near: her daughters that it was not near at all. She kept up very well, and they saw no danger.

One evening she was sitting on the sofa, with her feet up, near the open window, for she loved the air of the early summer; Hester and Mary were working, and Lucy reading aloud, when Mrs. Halliwell signed

to the latter to cease. "Someone is coming towards our house," she said, "like a traveller; for surely that is a truck of luggage following."

"A lady in deep mourning," added Mary, looking up. "Yes, she is making direct for our house. Who can it be?"

"Mamma," cried Hester hastily, "be prepared. I fear—you will not be alarmed."

"Hester, you know that I suffer nothing to alarm me. Speak out."

"I fear it is Aunt Copp, in widow's weeds."

Aunt Copp it proved to be. She came in, leaving Phœbe to take care of the luggage, and sat down amidst them without a word. Throwing back her crape veil, she pointed with both hands towards her full muslin cap and burst into tears.

"Dear Aunt Copp," cried Lucy, crying too, as she took her hands, "we see it all. When did it happen?"

"I don't know that I can tell you," she answered, after relieving herself by copious sobs. "And to think that Sam never saw his poor dear father before he went! He's second mate now."

"When did it happen?" they inquired.
"When we last heard, you were at Calcutta."

"Mind you, I knew the voyage would prove unlucky," said Aunt Copp, who went from one piece of news to another, in spite of her grief, and was certainly not one to bury it in silence; "for the very night after we started for home, a nasty great hulky-bulky ship came along, without lights, and stove in our bulwarks, took off the bowsprit, and ripped up the boats, and we had to put back to Sauger Roads for repair. But I said to the Captain, 'You'll see: this turn will be a bad one.' And sure enough it was. Ah, me!"

"Do not tell us about it just yet, if it pains you, Aunt Copp," said Mary.

"Oh, I'll tell you. It—— Is that Mary?" she demanded, taking the first good look at her. "I can tell you all what—she's the flower of the flock. I never saw so pretty a girl."

Mary was very pretty, with her dark silky hair, her rich blue eyes, and her delicate face, that was, just now, blushing crimson.

"A graceful, elegant girl as ever I saw," continued Aunt Copp. "You must be nineteen now."

"Just nineteen," murmured Mary, who was blushing still. "But will you not tell us, Aunt Copp—if not too painful?"

"There's not much to tell, my dear. Only that the voyage was disastrous from beginning to end. A fever broke out after our second starting; the chief mate and some of the crew died, rendering us short of hands. Then we had dreadful weather, nothing but storms and hurricanes; and my

poor husband was completely worn out with fatigue, which may have rendered him more likely to take illness. We touched at the Cape ; a fever was raging there ; not the same sort which had attacked the ship : my husband had escaped the first, but this he caught. When we sailed away from the Cape he was sickening for it, and in a week's time, girls—oh, it's a mournful thing to tell you!—his poor dear body was sewn up, and, at sundown, plunged into the sea. I hope it escaped those horrid sharks ; but"—lowering her voice to a whisper—"one was following the vessel."

"Aunt Copp," shuddered Mary, "why could you not have brought it home to be buried on land ? He could have lain by poor papa."

"Bless your ignorant heart, child, we can't keep the dead aboard ship. The sailors would jump into the sea first, and swim

away, on the chance of being picked up. Our second mate—a very nice young fellow, who had acted as first since the chief mate went off—read the service over his poor body, so it's a consolation to think he had Christian burial. And he was a good man," earnestly added Aunt Copp, "for he never ill-treated one of his sailors in his life; so I am not afraid but what he is happy."

"When did you land?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"Only just. Our second mate brought the ship home *well*; my poor old Captain could not have done it better. It's a great feather in his cap, and I have not forgotten to mention it in his certificate. I have a world of business before me. So as soon as I landed, after rigging myself in my new costume, which I feel most wretched in, and can't bear the sight of, I came right off to London to do it, taking you on the road, for a day or two, before I get there."

"I thought you were come for a long stay, Aunt Copp. There seemed a great deal of luggage."

"I never travel without plenty of luggage; there's no knowing what one may want. Some of it is for you. Dresses, and shawls, and I don't know what all, from Jane Pepper."

"Tell me about her," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"Well, I don't want to shock you, but unless Jane chooses to take heart, she'll just cry herself to death."

"Cry herself to death!" uttered Mrs. Halliwell.

"She cries morning, noon, and night. At least, she did for the last fortnight of my stay there. All the children are gone."

"*All!*"

"All three; they have followed the other two. Little sickly things they were. The

one died before I got to Calcutta, and the two others while I was there. So that makes all five gone. Of course Jane frets herself into shreds over it, and to reason with her was useless. ‘Five such darling children,’ she kept harping upon, ‘and all gone.’ ‘Your crying won’t mend it, Jane,’ I said, and with that she set on and cried the more. So I went to her husband. ‘Captain Pepper,’ I said (by the way, he’s getting on rapidly, and expects soon to have his majority), ‘do you want to bury Jane?’

“‘To bury her!’ he echoed, staring at me, ‘what do you mean, Aunt Copp?’—for, you see, that’s what he has taken to call me, through hearing Jane.

“‘Why, she’ll just fret and stew herself into her grave at the rate she is going on,’ I answered. ‘Now you had better persuade her to come with us to England. I and Captain Copp will take good care of her on

the voyage' (little thinking, you know, my dears, what a voyage we were going to have), 'and it will be change of scene and change of air. She'll stop with her mother and sisters, and when she's tired of them and her health is strong, she can come back to you. Now, Captain, you must just worry her till she consents, for it's the only thing.'

"I'll try and persuade her, Aunt Copp," said he. "I think a voyage to England would do her good, and I have told her so." Well, my dears, he could do nothing with her, any more than I could. Jane would not leave him: and my belief is, that though he talked to her before me, he just stopped when my back was turned. They are as fond of each other, are those two, as they were the day they married, which, as I represented to them, was perfectly unreasonable and ridiculous. However, the upshot was, that Jane let us sail without her, and I don't

believe you'll get her over to Europe at all, unless he can obtain leave and come with her. So there."

"How is she looking, Rebecca?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"As thin as a herring. And she has lost one of her front teeth, and her face is drawn and yellow. She looks ten years older than Hester."

"Oh, Aunt Copp!" exclaimed Hester.

"She does. I don't think the climate agrees with her. And then her children have come so quickly."

"And gone again," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"Oh, well," said Aunt Copp, "if she could only get over the grief, the poor little things are better off."

"How is Sam?"

"I suppose he's all right : I had a letter from him when I landed at Liverpool, which was waiting there. He has gone to the Bermudas."

"I hope you are left comfortably off, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell.

"Middling. It might be better and it might be worse. When things are squared up, I shall have about what the East India Company allow you—£200 a year, which, of course, will be Sam's after me. Sam has some in a lump, which I dare say he'll make ducks and drakes of, as soon as he touches it. Do you know," added Aunt Copp, peering at her sister-in-law, "you are not looking well. Very ill, *I* think."

"I cannot boast much, Rebecca."

"And now, girls, guess where I went as I came up from Liverpool. I took somebody in my way."

"The Halliwells at Middlebury, perhaps."

"No; Alfred. I wanted to see an old shipmate of the poor Captain's, who lives within a few miles of Chelson; so I thought I might as well go on, and have a look at them."

“Are they quite well?”

“Nothing to boast of. Alfred has a great deal to do, and is badly paid, and his wife has scarcely got over her last illness. At the pace they are going, they will have a score or two of children, I should say. Worse than Jane.”

“How do you like her, Rebecca?”

“Pretty well. She does not seem to be a first-rate manager, and there’s no regularity in the house; but then there’s only one servant for everything, children and baby and all. I should think the confusion must drive the parson wild at sermon-writing time. Mabel had a sister stopping with her for a day or two.”

“Which one?” asked Hester. “Matilda or Fanny?”

“Neither. They called her Amy. A meek-tempered, soft-headed girl as ever I saw; nothing to say for herself.”

"Then she is not like Hester's description of Matilda and Fanny," laughed Lucy.

"Hester," resumed Aunt Copp, going to another theme, "have you heard anything of that booby yet?"

"What booby?" exclaimed Hester.

"Your parson."

A deep flush rose to Hester's face. "No," she whispered. "Nothing."

"I hope you never will, for he was not worth it. And some of you ridiculed my cards!"

"Aunt Copp," broke in Mary, "have you told anyone's fortune lately?"

"Child," said Aunt Copp solemnly, "I have never told one since. I never will again."

"Since when?"

"That time. Before your papa died."

Somehow, that night Hester could not sleep. Since Mrs. Halliwell grew worse,

she had occupied a small bed in her room, and she slipped quietly out of it, and throwing on a dressing-gown, went into the corridor. It was a lovely night. The moon, nearly at the full, was riding, clear and bright, in the dark blue sky, and Hester stood at the window, looking out. She was thinking over many things: the passage of life seemed dark for their family just then. Her mother's decay, her sister Jane's sorrow, her brother's struggles, Captain Copp's death, and—it *would* mix with the rest—doubts of the fate of George Archer. Hester's tears came, and flowed silently. "But—God is over all," she murmured, looking up at the fair expanse of sky; "as He permits it, it *must* be right." Suddenly she started and listened: was that her mother calling to her in a faint voice? Hester glided silently in again: she was not sure.

"Hester—Hester—child—where—are—you?"

"Dearest mamma, what is the matter? You cannot breathe."

"I am worse, child;" but there was still a pause between every word. "Do not alarm the house. Call Phœbe only, and let her go for Mr. Davis."

Hester did not alarm the house, but she woke them quietly. Phœbe was despatched for Mr. Davis. It was early morning when he came, and in the evening of that same day Mrs. Halliwell died.

"What a mercy that I was here!" ejaculated Aunt Copp. "My poor girls, I'll stop with you till after the funeral, and then be off to London, get over my business, and come back to you."

"Do not put yourself out of the way to return to us, Aunt Copp," said Hester, for she had a dim idea that they should manage

better without her than with her; but her sorrow was too great just then to dwell upon trifles.

Alfred came to the funeral, and Mr. Halliwell of Middlebury. The mournful duties were gone through, and the business duties. It had been Mrs. Halliwell's wish that her daughters should remain in the house for a year after her death, for which she had provided. They would each then have £500, and alas! must look out for themselves, and do the best they could in life.

Aunt Copp was as good as her word, and she returned to them on the conclusion of her business in town, and a regular worry she proved to be. Desperately bustling and active, she interfered in everything. Not a bit of crape could they begin to hem, but Aunt Copp would clap on her tortoiseshell spectacles, go peering at it, and find some fault. It was not cut straight, or it was

begun at the wrong end, or the hem was not broad enough, and she would whisk it out of their hands, draw out the stitches at one pull, and make them begin it according to her own ideas. Not a thing could Hester steal into the kitchen to do, leaving her safe, as she hoped, with Lucy and Mary, but in five minutes she had ferreted her out. Hester was putting too much stuffing in the duck, and Phœbe had over-boiled the onions ; or—*that* was not enough jam for the roly-pudding ; and she'd have no salt put in the crust—she hated salt. This was enough to provoke Hester, who was a most efficient seamstress and house-wife, but she had a calm, patient temper, and bore with it. Phœbe put up with it less equably : Aunt Copp was the worry of her life ; and she went one day to Hester's bedroom in desperation to say that if Mrs. Copp stayed she should go.

Three months of it they had, and then Aunt Copp departed. Mary had been invited to visit Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell at Middlebury, so her aunt undertook to convey her there, on her way to Liverpool, where she intended to establish her home.

Mary Halliwell's stay at Middlebury lengthened into winter, and then she wrote to say they must not expect her till spring. However, a few days after the receipt of this letter by Hester, they were surprised by her arrival with Mr. Halliwell.

"Do you know why I have brought her to Seaford?" asked the latter.

"Because you were tired of her," said Hester; "which I thought you must have been, weeks ago."

"Not exactly that. Miss Mary has been engaging herself to take somebody else's name."

Hester and Lucy were too surprised to

speak. Mary stood with her eyes cast down and her cheeks crimson.

"And as I look upon you, Hester, somewhat in the light of a guardian to her," proceeded Mr. Halliwell, "I thought it my duty to come and lay the case before you, ere it went any further. Mary—where's she gone?"

Mary had escaped from the room. Hester sat down with a sigh. "There seems nothing but trouble," she breathed. "Is it a very unsuitable engagement?"

"Pray, my dear, who said it was unsuitable at all?" smiled Mr. Halliwell.

Hester considered. "I believe I inferred so from your manner—and Mary's."

"She is gone, so I'll speak out; but I don't foster her vanity by saying it before her. He is one of the nicest young fellows that ever lived; and she could not have chosen better if she had had the pick of all Middlebury."

"How you have relieved me!" exclaimed Hester. "Who is it?"

"Dr. Goring."

"A physician?"

"No, my dear," laughed Mr. Halliwell; "he is only a general practitioner: but we call them all doctors down with us. If I had a daughter, I don't know anyone I would sooner give her to than to young Goring. And I prove myself particularly disinterested in saying this, for someone else wanted Mary."

"Who?" questioned Hester.

"My son, poor Tom. She has given his heart a twinge; not purposely, for I never saw a girl with less coquetry in my life. She is an admirable girl, Hester."

"I trust she is," answered Hester, with pride.

"Tom soon found he should have no chance; so he drew in and set-to to cure himself of his love fever. And as he went

off it, Goring went into it. She did not look with a cool eye on *him*. He is a most attractive man, as you will soon see. He is here."

"Here!"

"He travelled with us, and is stopping at the Seaford Arms. I came on to make all straight for him, and he was to follow."

"Oh dear!" cried Hester.

"You need not say 'oh dear!'" laughed Mr. Halliwell. "He has nothing formidable about him: the pleasantest young man you ever spoke to."

"Has he a good income?" inquired Hester.

"A very good one. He has succeeded to an excellent practice in Middlebury. Take it altogether, Hester, it is a very desirable match for Mary. If—there he is." Hester looked from the window, and saw someone very good-looking coming down the opposite road.

Phœbe opened the door, and Dr. Goring (we may as well call him so as the Middlebury people) entered. A tall, slender, gentlemanly young man, with a sunny countenance, and a remarkably pleasant voice and manner. Hester did not wonder at Mary's having fallen in love with him ; she was ready to do so herself. He wanted the marriage to take place without delay.

"That cannot be," said Hester. "Her mother has only been dead six months."

"But just consider," argued Dr. Goring, laughing and looking as if he did not believe that to be an insuperable bar. "Some of my patients object to me because I am a bachelor. I assure you, Miss Halliwell, it is essential to my professional interests that I marry."

"We so loved our dear mother : all Seaford so respected her. No, Dr. Goring ; decidedly no. The very day after the first year's mourning shall be up, then you may

have Mary. I scarcely think she would herself wish it to take place earlier."

"But I do," he said.

"Do not urge it, Dr. Goring. Indeed, I cannot consent. I feel that it would not be right; not seemly."

So Dr. Goring and Mr. Halliwell went back to Middlebury, and the wedding was settled to take place in June. Mary, of course, remained at home, busy enough with her preparations. Dr. Goring paid them a flying visit now and then, and the period drew near.

What was their astonishment, a few days previous to it, to see Aunt Copp arriving! Hester had incautiously written her word of the progress of affairs, and instead of receiving an answer, wishing Mary good luck, or something of that sort, who should come but Aunt Copp herself, by the morning mail, to be followed, in the course of the day,

by a sea - chest, two hair - trunks, and two band-boxes, the mail having refused to carry them. Hester and Lucy were petrified.

"Now, what do you three girls think of yourselves?" she began. "Did you ever hear of a young girl being married from a house without a matron in it to countenance her?"

The idea had really not occurred to Hester. Steady and sedate, and turned thirty years of age, she believed herself a proper guide and protector to Mary, and ventured to hint as much to her aunt.

"Quite false ideas," called out Aunt Copp. "Never was such a thing heard of, I tell you, as a young lass going out of a house where there was no married woman in it. For my part, I question if such a wedding would stand good. Why, you would have been the talk for miles round. And Mary is such a child."

"I am twenty, Aunt Copp," interrupted Mary.

"Twenty!" scornfully ejaculated Aunt Copp. "So was I twenty when I married my poor dead-and-gone sailor husband, and a precious goose he found me. I was one-and-twenty when my darling boy was born (I had a letter from him last week, girls, and he's made first mate now, through the other one going off with yellow fever; and was beating about in a calm in the Pacific, which gave him time to write), and a precious goose of a mother *he* found me, the innocent baby! So don't boast to me of your twenty years; go and tell it to the marines. What should three girls know about the management necessary at a wedding? Have you thought to order the cake?"

"Oh yes, we have done that."

"And to get cards printed?"

"And that also."

"And the style of setting out the breakfast? Have you discussed that?"

"Not yet."

"I thought so," groaned Aunt Copp. "No ship-shape arrangements beforehand, no consultations, no nothing. A pretty muddle you'll be in when the morning comes! be leaving the dressing of the table to Phœbe, or some such carelessness. She'll put the fowls at the side, and the custards round with the glasses; for of all incapable headpieces, that woman's is the worst. Oh! if the poor Major could only look up from his grave and witness this state of things! or your dear mamma! Of course you'll have custards?"

"If you think it necessary, Aunt Copp," said Hester; "but we do not wish any needless show or expense. Besides the clergyman and his wife, and two or three more friends, there will only be ourselves and Alfred."

"Why, you have never gone and sent for Alfred!" snapped Aunt Copp. It was not that she was really ill-tempered, but her way of snapping people up had grown upon her more than ever.

"Alfred is to marry me, Aunt Copp," said Mary.

"Lord help ye for three thoughtless simpletons—and him for another! A poor fellow, whose living is only a hundred and seventy-five pounds a year, fees included, and whose outgoings take it half off pretty nearly, before he can say a shilling of it is his own, and his wife sick, and his children coming on as thick as blackberries, to be dragged across the country, a hundred miles, to marry a child! It will be four pounds out of his pocket."

"It will not be out of *his* pocket, Aunt Copp," interrupted Lucy in a nettled tone; "we have taken care of that." But Aunt

Copp only groaned in answer: she never would allow that they did anything right.

"And pray, Miss Lucy, is there anything of the sort afoot for you?" she went on.

"Why, Aunt Copp!" ejaculated Lucy, laughing and blushing. "Of course not."

"I don't see any 'of course' in the matter. If Hester is fated to live and die an old maid, that's no reason why you should. I advise you to set about looking out for a suitable husband. If you have not Mary's beauty, you are a likely-looking, lady-like girl, and you'll never see seven-and-twenty again. Keep your weather-eye open, and —dear me! the very thing!"

This concluding exclamation, in a changed tone of voice, as if Aunt Copp had just recollected something, caused them to look at her.

"I wish to goodness I knew where he was bound to! But, you see, when I got out, he went on in the mail."

"What is it you are talking of, Aunt Copp?"

"Such a charming gentleman! He was my fellow-passenger. Where he came from I cannot tell you, for he was in the mail when I got in. I should think, by his conversation, he was a Londoner, and had been down to our part of the country. A fine man as you'd wish to see, six foot high, with a full blue eye, and a colour like a red cabbage. He told me he was looking out for a wife, and had come out travelling to find one, and meant to marry as soon as he had found her. It would be the very thing for Lucy! I declare, if he were within reasonable distance, I'd send my card, and ask him to tea. I know I should get him for you, Lucy."

"Really, Aunt Copp, you are growing old and ridiculous," responded Lucy, uncertain whether to laugh or be angry.

"Old, am I! ridiculous, am I!" bridled Aunt Copp, in a fury; "everybody doesn't think so. Why, he wanted to try it on me, I could see he did, a handsome man like him, and not a day more than five or six and thirty. He did, Miss Lucy, and you need not begin grinning there. We had the mail to ourselves, or as good, for the fat farmer who took up the opposite seat nearly from side to side was snoring all night. Very polite indeed he was, and very respectful; quite the gentleman in his manners, and would keep on kissing my hand. But I volunteered to tell him I had been married once, which I had found quite enough, and I did not purpose taking another, preferring to remain my own mistress, besides having a dear son, who was chief officer of a splendid two-decker, now becalmed in the Pacific (unless the wind should have got up since), and that I had no love to spare from my boy

for the best second husband that could offer. Whereupon my gentleman turned sulky and gathered himself up in his corner. Old, am I? Forty-five's old, is it? Just put that window up, Mary. I'm hot."

So they had to endure Aunt Copp's company, and make the best of it. But even before Mary's wedding morning arrived, and her handsome young husband came and took her away, she had tried their patience severely.





CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN KERLETON.

VERY dull they felt the day after the wedding, Friday. Aunt Copp was setting things to rights in the house and worrying Phœbe in the kitchen, while Hester and Lucy seemed scarcely to know what to do with themselves. Their brother had left them early in the morning, wishing to get home before Saturday. After dinner, Lucy proposed a walk, and Aunt Copp acquiesced.

“Let us go and look at the haymaking,” she said. “The smell of it, coming in here at the windows, puts me in mind of my young

days, when I tumbled over the haycocks with the best of them."

Accordingly, they went into the hayfield, one rented by Mr. Williams, the rector. He was there with his wife and little boys, at work in his shirt-sleeves. "That's right, young ladies," he called out, when he saw them, "come and scatter the hay about: the more it's open to the sun the better, this hot afternoon. A pleasant rural scene this, ma'am"—to Aunt Copp.

"Yes, sir. I was telling the girls that the smell made me believe myself young again. I have not been in the way of it much, Mr. Williams, since I settled in life; what with living in seaport towns, where one's nose meets with nothing but tar and pitch, and going voyages with my husband, where one scents nothing but salt brine, and never sees a field for months. There, Hester!"

Aunt Copp, with her great strong arms,

had seized a whole haycock, and dashed it over Hester. That was the commencement of the sport. They laughed, and screamed, and smothered each other in hay, Mrs. Williams and Lucy being foremost in the fray.

After two hours' fun, they were leaving the field, tired, heated and thirsty, when Aunt Copp, who had rushed up to a haycock, some few of which were left intact near the entrance, intending to favour Hester and Lucy with a parting salute from behind, gave a loud scream, which caused them to look round.

Well done, Aunt Copp! Instead of securing the mound of hay, her arms had entangled themselves round the neck of a gentleman, who had stretched himself to recline on the off-side of it, and had fallen into a doze.

“Good heavens above!” ejaculated Aunt

Copp. "I beg your pardon, sir. I thought I was laying hold of nothing but the haycock."

"No offence, ma'am. I wish you'd put your arms there again. Ah, my dear regretted fellow-traveller, is it you? How *do* you find yourself by this time? I have been up and down the country ever since. I forgot, you must know, the name of the place where you stopped, so I thought I'd take all the stopping places of the mail, one by one, which I did, and came here in rotation this afternoon, intending to pay my respects to you. What two delightful ladies!"

"They are my nieces," returned Aunt Copp. "Miss Halliwell and Miss Lucy Halliwell."

"And I am Captain Kerleton—if you will allow me to introduce myself—formerly serving with my regiment in India; but the duty did not agree with me, so I sold out.

Would this little spot be a pleasant part of the country to stop in for a week or two, think you?"

"Very," cried Aunt Copp impressively. "And the Seaford Arms is an excellent inn."

"Then I'm off for it. Which is the road?"

"There," she replied, pointing in the direction of the village, "about five minutes' walk. But won't you step in with us, and take a cup of tea? It will refresh you this hot afternoon. Our house is close by. Girls," she added, seizing a minute to whisper to them as they walked on, for the stranger eagerly accepted the invitation, "this is the gentleman I told you of, the one in the mail, you know, who wants a wife. So look out, Lucy."

Lucy felt annoyed, and naturally. She was a most retiring-minded girl, and had a

genuine horror of thrusting herself forward to attract the notice of gentlemen. Hester was even more displeased. She thought it exceedingly wrong of her aunt to introduce a stranger to their home in that uncere-monious manner. What did she know of Captain Kerleton? He might be an ad-venturer, a swindler, for all she could tell to the contrary. As it afterwards turned out, he *was* a gentleman, of good family and fortune, but that was no thanks to Aunt Copp's prudence. The fact was, Mrs. Copp had been connected with seafaring people so long that she had imbibed a touch of their free-and-easy notions, and had become almost as open-hearted in her manners as her late husband, the merchant-captain.

Captain Kerleton took up his residence at the Seaford Arms, and a gay time of it ensued. The whole neighbourhood under-took to patronize him, especially the houses

which contained grown-up daughters, for his fortune, really a good one, report considerably magnified. Picnic parties, evening parties, hay-making parties, followed close upon each other, some of which owned Aunt Copp for their projector; none remembered the quiet village ever to have been so gay. Captain Kerleton did his utmost to render himself agreeable: would run his head off to fetch and carry at any lady's whim; dance himself lame and sing himself hoarse; and when once he *was* set dancing and singing there was no stopping him. On the whole, Hester liked his manners, and the Seaford Arms gave a pleasant account of his quiet, gentlemanly habits; but there was one trick of his which was a strange one—that of *staring*. He would sometimes be seized with one of these staring fits, and then he would sit in his chair and look someone straight in the

face for a quarter of an hour together, and never once move his eyes. Sometimes it would be Aunt Copp, sometimes Hester, sometimes Lucy, and sometimes others ; it seemed to be all the same to the Captain. Once it was Phœbe. He had gone into the kitchen to ask her to brush his coat, which had accidentally acquired some dust, and there he sat himself down and stared at Phœbe, until the girl grew so confused that she sidled out of the kitchen and left him to it, bolting herself in the back-house.

One morning they were seated at the open window of their front parlour, busy over some shirts and bands for Alfred (whose poor wife had enough to do with her children and her household cares without thinking of new shirts and bands for the parson), and were conversing, sadly enough, of their future prospects, which

were anything but distinct, when some scarlet object came looming up the opposite road. Lucy saw it first, and they all looked up through the closed Venetian blinds. The sun shone on it, hot and bright, and the scarlet was intermingled with something that glistened like gold, and dazzled the sight.

"Goodness heart alive!" uttered Aunt Copp, after a puzzled gaze through her spectacles, "if it is not Captain Kerleton in his regimentals!"

They had never seen the Captain in his regimentals, and a very imposing sight it was. He detected them at the window, and walked straight up to it.

"Good-morning, ladies," he said, putting his face close to the blind. "Is not this a blazing day?"

"Something else looks blazing, I think, Captain," cried Aunt Copp. "We did not know you."

" You mean me in my regimentals," returned the Captain ; " they came down last night. I should have had them before, but the servants at home made a mistake, and sent my brother's. He is in Scotland—gone to look after his property—or it would not have happened. What are you working at so attentively, Miss Lucy?"

" I am stitching a wristband, Captain Kerleton."

" Not for me, Miss Lucy?"

" No," laughed Lucy. " For my brother."

" Perhaps the time may come, Miss Lucy, when you will stitch mine."

Aunt Copp gave a significant cough, and Lucy, after a surprised glance upwards, blushed deeply, and went on fast with her stitching.

" Will you walk in, Captain?" said Mrs. Copp. " You will find the front door open."

"Not this morning," replied the Captain. "I only came to bring this—if you'll please to open the blind."

Aunt Copp drew open the half of the Venetian blind, and the Captain thrust in a small parcel, tied up in white paper, turning short away as soon as she had it in her hands. There was no direction, and Aunt Copp held it in uncertainty.

"Captain Kerleton," she called after him, "what's this for? Is it to be opened?"

"Opened? of course!" answered the Captain, whirling his head round to speak, his legs striding away all the while; "I did not bring it for anything else."

What should be in this parcel but a green and gold book, and a small, beautifully enamelled watch, in a case. They opened the book, full of curiosity. "Advice to Young Ladies about to Enter into House-keeping. By a Clergyman's Wife." And

on the fly-leaf was written, "For the future Mrs. Kerleton, with respectful regards." On the paper enclosing the watch was written, "Miss Lucy."

"Well, if ever I saw such a start as this!" uttered Aunt Copp, while Lucy's face turned of an indignant red.

"It is shameful, Aunt Copp! It is quite indecent of you! You have been saying something to him about me. I am sure of it!"

"I declare to goodness I have not!" fired Aunt Copp. "This offer of marriage—for it's nothing less—has come of his own free will, and from no talking of mine. Shan't we have a nice time of it, getting her wedding things ready, Hester?"

"Aunt Copp, I always thought you were an idiot, and now I know it," retorted Lucy, struggling between tears and rage. "Offer of marriage, indeed! If it *is* an offer of marriage, you may take it to yourself.

Hester, just pack the watch back again to the Seaford Arms; send Phœbe with it. My name was not on the book, so Aunt Copp can do as she chooses with that—keep it for herself, and tell him so."

Lucy's tirade was cut short, for the blind was again pushed partly open, and a scarlet wrist came in.

"I beg your pardon," cried the Captain's voice, "I forgot this." Aunt Copp involuntarily stretched forth her hand, and received another packet, similar to the one which had contained the watch, the Captain darting off as before at the military pace of a forced march.

"' Miss Lucy Halliwell,'" read Mrs. Copp, again, through her spectacles.

"I won't have it! call him back! throw it after him!" exclaimed Lucy. But Aunt Copp told her she knew better what she was about, and opened it.

A pretty gold chain and a watch-key.

"Well, my dear," said Aunt Copp, "you are in luck."

"Luck!" ironically uttered Lucy. "The man's a fool."

"I know who is a greater," rejoined Mrs. Copp, laughing at Lucy.

"Hester, I appeal to you. Is it right—is it in accordance with good manners, his poking these things in at the window? Ought they not to be sent back instantly?"

"I think it is in accordance with good-nature," Hester gently replied, "and to forward them back, as you suggest, would be returning insult for kindness. When he next calls, let Aunt Copp return him the presents, and civilly inform him that you cannot accept them."

"I wish you may get me to do it," cried Mrs. Copp. "'There is a tide in the affairs of man,' and Lucy has now got hers."

So the task fell to Hester. And when the Captain called that afternoon (still in his regimentals) Hester went to him alone. But before she had well entered upon the subject, Captain Kerleton interrupted her, and made Lucy a very handsome offer. Hester was at a nonplus, not knowing, now the affair was put upon a regular footing, whether Lucy would have him or not. She retired to the next room.

"Have him? of course," cried Aunt Copp.

"Have him? of course not," repeated Lucy.

"Niece Lucy, the matter is serious now, and you must not be childish over it. What is your objection?"

"I don't know enough of him," said Lucy. "Consider, Aunt Copp, it is only a fortnight since we first set eyes on him. The idea of promising to marry a man after a fortnight's acquaintance!"

"You need not marry him off-hand—or promise to," argued Aunt Copp. "You can tell him you wish to see a little more of him before deciding; that will be neither accepting nor rejecting, and give you both time to improve your acquaintance with each other. *I'll* manage it."

Before they could prevent her, she dashed out of the room and joined the Captain, whom they had heard whistling as he leaned from the window. What she said to him neither Hester nor Lucy knew, but she reappeared with the Captain in her wake, and the latter fell on his regimental knees, in the most ridiculous manner, and began kissing Lucy's hand.

When they could get him off his knees and his heroics, Hester and Mrs. Copp strove to convince him how the case stood: that he was not to look upon Lucy as engaged to him, but that she was willing to meet him as

an acquaintance, till they had seen more of each other. Oh yes, yes! he agreed to everything, too glad to do it, except to taking back the presents. He grew excited when it was named, and said they would never mention it again, unless they wished to cut him to the throat. Whether he unintentionally substituted that word for heart, or whether he really contemplated making an illegitimate use of his shaving razors, in case his presents were rejected, they did not comprehend. "Never mind the presents, Lucy," cried Aunt Copp; "don't offend him; it will be time enough to send them back if you finally reject him."

So Captain Kerleton stayed on at the Seaford Arms, and Aunt Copp stayed on with her nieces, for she argued that to leave Lucy at so critical a period would not be "ship-shape." It came to be rumoured in the village that the Captain and Lucy were

engaged, and some congratulated her, in spite of her denial, and some were envious. The Captain had bought favour on all sides. When anyone gave a party, there would appear dishes of the choicest fruit, the offering of the Captain, and baskets of fish were perpetually arriving everywhere with the Captain's card : he kept the younger ladies in gloves and bouquets, and once, when a concert was to be given in the village for the benefit of the poor music-master, the Captain bought up all the tickets, and treated everybody. Twice he scattered silver by the handful amongst the field labourers, and the village was in an uproar for days afterwards, to the wrath of the farmers and the edification of the beershops. Nothing came amiss to the Captain's purse ; whatever he saw, he bought up and distributed, from parcels of new books to litters of sucking-pigs. As to Lucy Halliwell, the things that arrived for her were just as

incongruous. One morning there was a knock at the door, and upon Phœbe's answering it, an air-cushion was delivered to her; an hour afterwards there was another knock, and this proved to be the milliner's girl, bearing a flaming rose-coloured bonnet and feathers. Aunt Copp thought these two articles must be meant for her, not being particularly suitable to Lucy; however, they were put by with the rest of the things. As to remonstrating with Captain Kerleton, they had given that over as a bad job, and had no resource but to take the things in. Many of them came from London, without address to send them back to, and they did not choose to raise a scandal by despatching them to the Captain's apartments at the inn.

But things could not go on like that for ever, and Lucy felt that she must accept or reject him. The Captain felt so too, and he went up one day and told Lucy, in the

presence of her sister and aunt, that he had been lying on tenter-hooks all night, and for several previous nights besides, and *would* she marry him ?

"I'll make her so happy," said he, appealing to Aunt Copp, as Lucy glided from the room ; "she will have what she likes, and go where she likes. Would she like to see China ?"

Mrs. Copp thought not. It was too far. She had once, herself, been in the Chinese seas, and was glad in her heart to get into British ones again.

"Oh ! Because distance is no object to me," explained the Captain.

"I think, Captain Kerleton, that Lucy would wish to see a little of your family," suggested Hester.

"There's not a soul left of it but me and my brother," answered the Captain. "When he comes back from Scotland, I'll take Lucy up to see him, if she likes ; which would be a

good opportunity for her to get anything in London she may want for the wedding."

He evidently spoke in no bad faith; Hester saw he did not. But he did make simple remarks now and then, such as one might expect to hear from a child.

"That's not the fashion in our part of the country," said Aunt Copp, snapping him up. "Young ladies don't go on journeys with gentlemen before they are married to them."

"But that is exactly what I want," returned the Captain. "I have been ready to marry her all along. It was Miss Lucy who would not. Will she marry me to-morrow?"

"Goodness, Captain!" remonstrated Aunt Copp. "With no house, and no establishment, and no anything? The neighbours would think us all out of our senses together!"

"Well, the long and the short of it is this: if Miss Lucy will not have me, I shall go and find somebody else who will," cried the

Captain, turning sulky—an occasional failing of his. "And I'll go by the mail to-night, if she does not give me an answer to-day."

Lucy gave him his answer, and accepted him. "But, Hester," she said to her sister, "I do it chiefly to oblige him and Aunt Copp; I don't much care for him." And Hester's opinion was that Lucy spoke the truth.

"I am not madly in love, you know," she went on, laughing, "as you were with somebody, once upon a time. I do not fancy it is in my constitution, or else our friend the Captain has failed to call it forth."

It was decided that, before fixing on any place for a residence, Captain Kerleton and Lucy should travel a little, after their marriage, taking Paris first. The Captain was perfectly agreeable to anything: would stop in the neighbourhood of Seaford, or live in London, or be a fixture in Paris, or voyage over to China. Everything that

Lucy or Mrs. Copp suggested he fell in with. He seemed to think more about personal trifles. "Would you like me to go through the ceremony in my regimentals, Miss Lucy, or in plain clothes?" he inquired. "Such—let us say—as a blue coat, white waistcoat, and black—these things," slapping his knee. "What is your advice?"

It was a very home question, especially before witnesses, and Lucy blushed excessively. "Perhaps Aunt Copp can tell," she stammered.

"Oh, as to those trifles, it's not a bit of consequence," irreverently answered Aunt Copp. "When you two have once got your wedding over, you will know what nonsense it was to have made any fuss about it—as we old married staggers can tell you. Captain, of course you will have your brother down to be groomsman?"

"No, I won't," replied the Captain bluntly. "He is the most interfering fellow

going, always meddling and thwarting. You don't know the scrapes he has got me into through his interference."

"But your own elder brother, Captain Kerleton," urged Aunt Copp. "It would be so very undutiful."

"Shouldn't care if he was my own mother," doggedly retorted the Captain. "He is not coming down to my wedding."

But Aunt Copp was of a different opinion. And what should she do, unknown to everyone, but despatch the following note to Major Kerleton, the Captain's brother, at his town house :

"DEAR SIR,—"As we are soon to be near connections, I make no apology for addressing you. Captain Kerleton being about to marry my niece, Miss Lucy Halliwell, I think it only seemly and right that you, as the Captain's elder brother and nearest

relative, should be present to give your support and countenance to the ceremony. It will not take place for three weeks or a month, and we are only now beginning the preparations ; but I write thus early to give an opportunity of my letter being forwarded to you in Scotland, where we hear you are staying. If you oblige me with a line in reply, stating that you accord us the favour of your company, I will write again and let you know when the day is fixed.

“ Remaining, dear sir,

“ Your obedient servant,

“ Major Kerleton.”

“ REBECCA COPP.

And Mrs. Copp hugged herself in secret over what she had done, and told nobody.

END OF VOL. I.





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